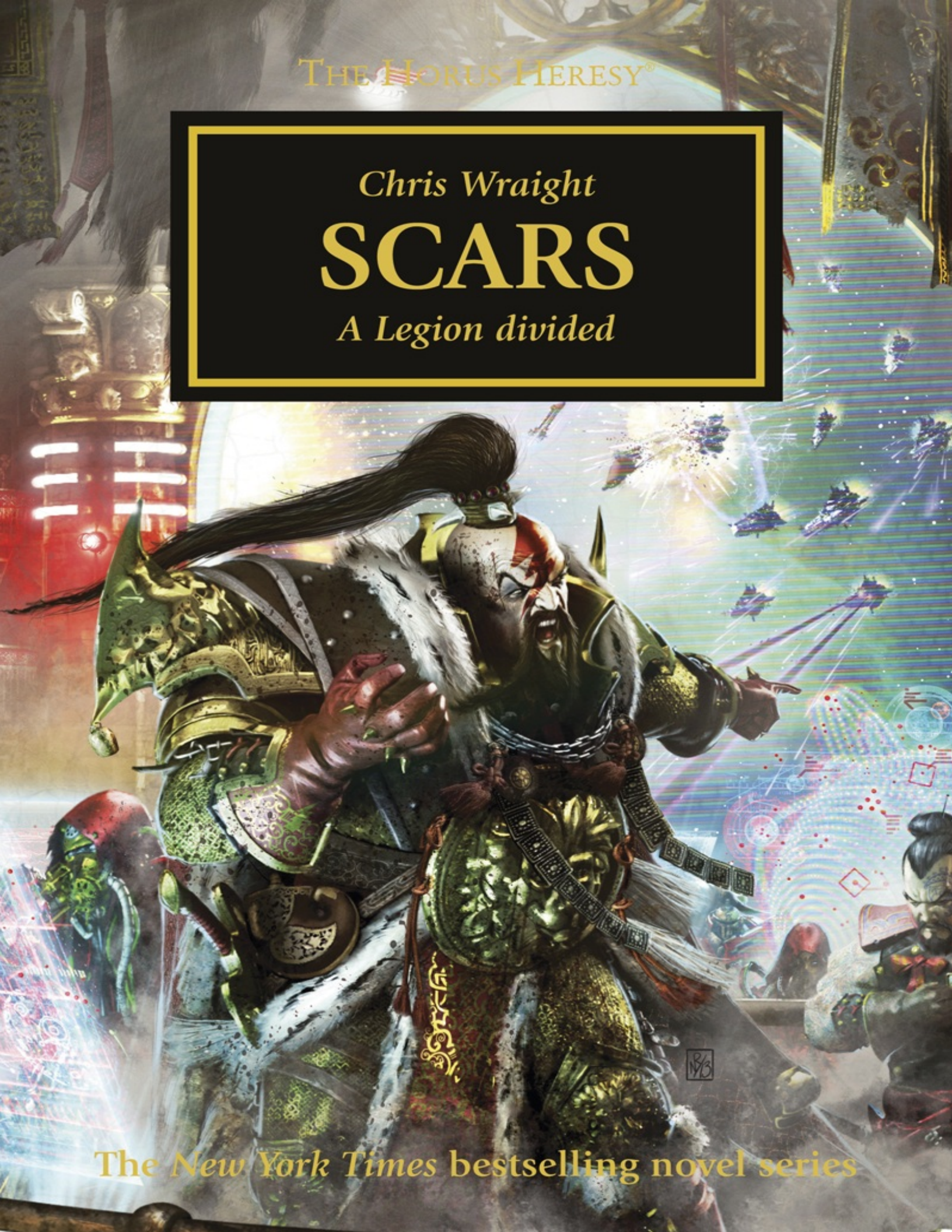
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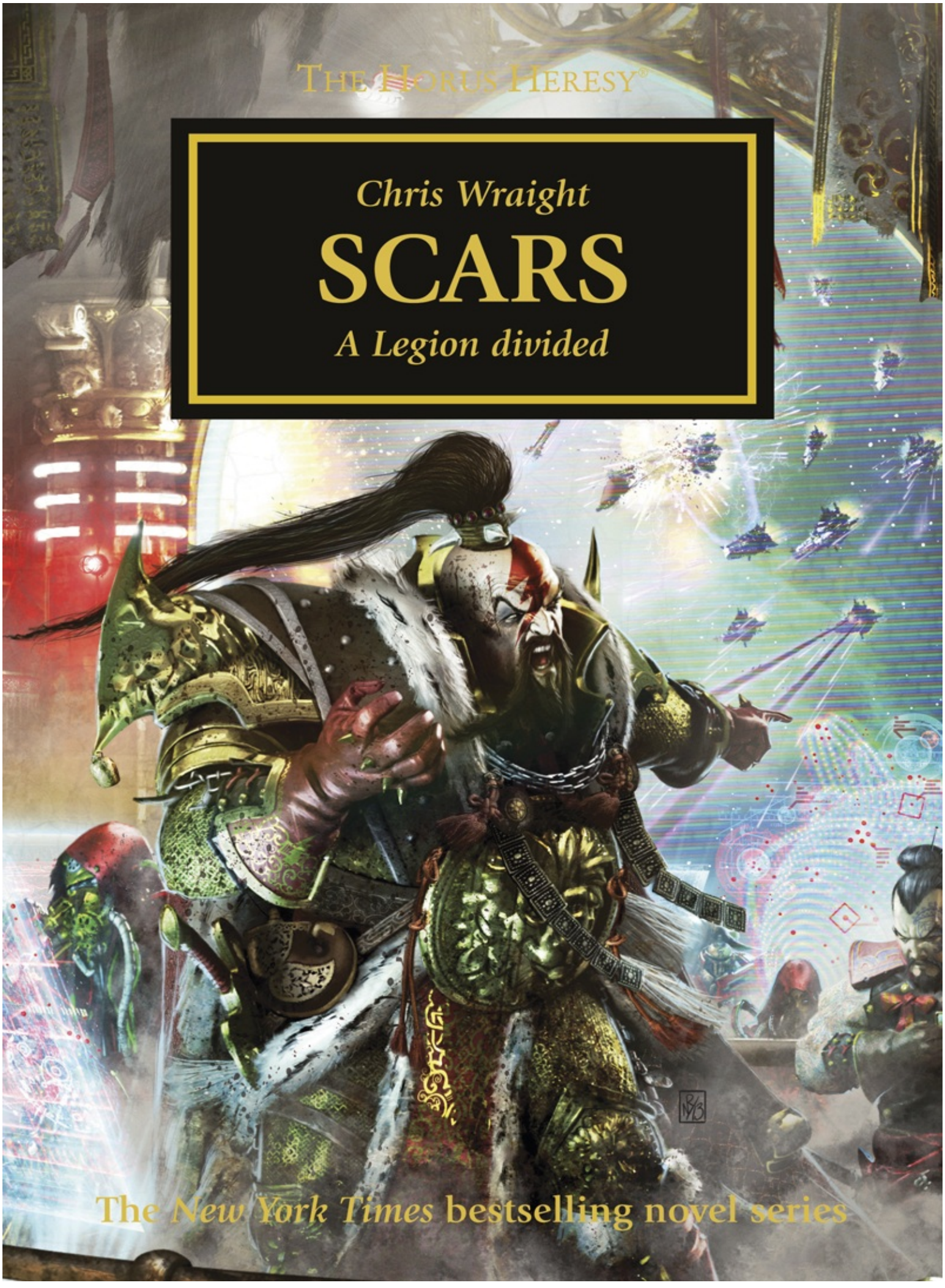
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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.

The Age of Darkness has begun.

‘Matter is a slave in whatever realm of being it occupies. In the world of the senses it is constrained by the silent laws of space, time, logic and number. In the other world it is shackled to other immutable rigours – dreams, hopes, vicious desires. These things are the tenets of physics in that place. As our nightmares are but shadows in this world, banished by the hard-edged dawn of reason, order is but a shadow in that one.

‘Which is the more real? Which endures, and which is doomed to destruction? You may say neither, for they are reflections of one another. This is false. You must choose. We learned this during seven years of blood and compelled maturity.

‘You must choose.

‘Daemons and mortals alike may have dignity. Only the vacillator, the equivocator, the cautious – only he has no place in the heavens.’

– Reflections,
Targutai Yesugei

PROLOGUE

Brothers

He rolled onto his front, coughing blood between broken teeth. His chest dragged across the hard, grassy earth before he felt hands reach down for him again.

Withdraw, then return.

The words ran through his mind as hands tugged at his torn kaftan. That was the first principle of the Khin-zan way of war – to unbalance, to force into overreach, to hit on the counter.

Tamu pulled his knees up sharply and pushed back against the clutching fingers. He heard a grunt of surprise as his wiry body thrust upwards, sending one of his assailants tumbling.

He twisted around, loosing a tight-balled fist and feeling it connect. Another grunt, another body swaying away.

Something hit his temple, knocking him down again. He saw the grass beneath him blur. His face thudded into the turf and he tasted flakes of grit between clenched teeth.

More blows came in – kicks to his legs, thumps against his exposed back. He writhed, trying to find a way back up. A hot, wet pain started up at the back of his head.

One of them stooped, thinking him finished, reaching for the scruff of his neck, ready to drag him up and cast him down again in the way the Talskar did to demonstrate mastery over an opponent.

Withdraw, then return.

Tamu waited, just for a fraction of a second. Then he bucked again, arching and squirming his body like an eel, swinging up and round, grabbing his assailant by his chest. He looked up into a face full of surprise, and laughed. Then he jabbed his head, butting against a looming brow, watching the blood speckle out and his captor reel from the impact.

He thought then that he might break free of them, scatter the group and somehow tear away, back down the dry river course and to safety. It proved a fleeting hope – he was grabbed again, more securely this time, two hands at his shoulders gripped him fast. He was hurled onto his back. He saw three faces hovering over him, each one bruised and angry. Another kick came in, hard into his midriff. He curled up, gasping.

‘Enough.’

They stopped immediately. They paused. They turned their heads. Uncertainty rippled through them.

Tamu lifted his head. His vision was blurry. He saw one of them scamper off, breaking into a limping run. Then the others followed – two heavy-set men from Alju’s hearth wearing the red sashes of the old man’s *keshig*. They didn’t look back. As they ran they picked up speed, as if some strange panic had suddenly kindled in them.

Tamu felt blood trickle down the back of his neck. He tried to rise and failed. The wind felt cold against his clothes despite the sun being high in the sky.

He couldn’t see the one who’d spoken. Light glared painfully off the plains, dazzling him. He pushed himself up onto his elbows.

‘What quarrel did they have with you?’ came the voice.

Tamu twisted his head towards the sound. A man walked out of the haze, his outline shimmering in the clear air. He was tall and broad – incredibly tall, incredibly broad – and clad in bone armour plates that glittered in the brightness. He carried a staff topped with a skull and wore an elaborate

hood over his bare head.

Only then was Tamu afraid. Where had the giant come from? The grassland had been empty a minute ago – just him and the three others, grappling and running across the wind-ruffled Altak.

It took some force of will to reply.

'I do not know,' Tamu said.

None of the man's features moved, but Tamu detected amusement.

'What quarrel did they have with you?' the man asked again, inflecting the words identically.

Tamu felt dizzy. The trickle of blood slowed but did not stop. The man made no move to help him.

'I stole *aduun*,' Tamu said, opting for the truth. He'd opened Alju's corral in the night, leading three of his steeds away and taking them down the river to Erdil's hearth. That had earned him a gulp of fermented milk and a slice of belly meat; worth a beating.

'Three grown men against one boy,' the man observed. 'You hurt them almost as badly as they hurt you.'

Despite the pain, Tamu grinned. He knew he had.

The man crouched down, coming closer to his level and looking at Tamu closely. Tamu saw a long, jagged scar on his tanned cheek. The man had an unusual aroma, and a faint hum came from his body, as if a beast murmured somewhere in the folds of his cloak. His eyes were strange – golden, soft and glistening. They were like an animal's eyes.

'What is your name?' he asked.

'Tamu.'

'How old are you?'

'Twelve years.'

The man pursed his lips. 'Eight in Terran,' he murmured. 'Not too late.'

Tamu frowned. 'Not too late for what?'

The man rose to his feet again. 'Come with me.'

Tamu hesitated. His head was beginning to ache.

'Come where?' For some reason he thought of his mother, his father, his brothers, huddled in the *ger*, down in the valley, busy with a hundred mundane things. They would not miss him until dusk. Perhaps longer.

'Do not question,' said the hooded man. 'Do as I say.' Then, for the first time, he really smiled. The gesture was not without warmth, his bright white teeth flashing between leathery dark lips. 'Unless you think you could take me, too.'

Tamu didn't move. He tensed his body, just as he had done before the others had caught up with him.

Withdraw, then return, he thought.

Rain angled down from a slate-dark sky, hammering and cold. The wide training ground was open to the elements and the water bounced from the rockcrete, glittering under flood-lumens arranged around the perimeter. In the distance rose spires: Iphigenis, Teleon, Morvo. Their ranked lines of hab-lights were faint, blurred by rain and the night and the atmospheric haze.

A line of two dozen boys stood shivering in the downpour, each dressed only in a grey shift. The youngest might have been seven, the oldest no more than nine. They stared directly ahead, chins jutting with determination, water running down their tight faces.

Haren shivered just like the others. Despite his origin in Skandmark his lean frame made him feel the cold. His fingernails pressed into the palms of his hands as he clenched his fists, determined not to lose control. On either side of him he could sense the other boys doing the same – Trevi, Amada, Kenet, all steeling themselves against the freeze, the dark, the fatigue, the nerves.

No backward step, he thought to himself, remembering the words of the man who had taken him from his home in the frozen north and brought him halfway across Terra to the training centres in Imamdo. He'd learned later that those words were a credo of the organisation, something whispered by the battle-brothers to themselves before battle. It was said that the Legion had never retreated. He wanted to believe that. If true, it made them even more glorious, even more worthy of worship.

'The test is of endurance,' said the instructor, a severe-faced man with cropped black hair, standing to one side of the line, barely looking at them. Haren had hated him on arrival – they all had. Now he felt nothing towards him, just a vague sense that he was one more obstacle amid a life of obstacles. For the last two months Haren had been tested, tried, pummelled, moulded, degraded and exhausted. The trials no longer hurt him, but they did remind him of the goal. He was close now. After so long, he was so very close.

The instructor glanced upwards and rain spattered against his face. He looked sourly at the heavens. 'You will be observed. Do not aid your brothers – this is an individual exercise. Begin with the gong.'

Haren tried to loosen up. He looked out across the rockcrete arena before them. A long, looping track ran around the edge of it. Obstacles stood in the way: ramps, pits, walls, waterlogged tunnels. He'd been around the same course many times, sometimes more than once in a day. Every crevice and muddy puddle of it was familiar to him.

He wondered how long the test would run for. They would make it long enough to weed out the weakest, to see how their conditioning programmes had fared.

Haren considered his chances. They were good. Standing still and shuddering in the cold was the worst part; his muscles would respond once he was moving.

Trevi leaned close. 'Good luck,' he said.

Haren nodded in response. His stomach was too knotted for him to speak. It felt as if the tension in his muscles might spread to his heart.

The gong sounded.

The boys broke into a run. None of them sprinted, for they all knew how arduous the test would be. None of them dawdled, for they all knew what the punishments were for insufficient effort. All twenty-four of them jogged out onto the track, quickly settling into the rhythms they had been taught, letting their breathing adjust, inhaling through their nostrils and exhaling through half-open mouths. They stayed together in a loose huddle, padding around the damp surface in worn training shoes.

Haren fell into his stride in the middle of the group. He let his mind glide into the semi-aware state that it always adopted during endurance exercises, repeating the empty phrase over and over again in time with his thudding feet.

No backward step. No backward step.

Some boys started struggling immediately – they'd let their muscles go cold during the long wait, or were under-hydrated, or were carrying injuries from previous sessions. Haren gave them no thought. He ran steadily, scaling the ramps, leaping over the pits, hauling himself up the walls and throwing himself down on the far side. He slipped easily into the run-rhythm, feeling his heart and lungs match the metronomic beat he played in his mind.

His mind wandered. It was hard not to remember his previous life – his red-cheeked mother with her blonde hair in a tight bun, his father with his thinning pate, his older sister with her quiet voice and quick eyes. The exercises were designed to help you to forget the ones you'd left behind, but memories would come back when you least expected them to. Haren sometimes wondered if they would ever really leave. Perhaps after Ascension they would. For all he knew, Ascension wiped all your memories, scraping your mind clean.

No backward step.

He kept running. Loops of the track passed in sequence, over and over again. He began to feel the

first stabs of muscle-burn. He felt old scars in his knees ache. He felt his lungs throb as he drew cold air in deeply. Circuits passed by, merging into one another.

After two hours the first boy dropped out, shuddering as he tried to inhale, his limbs trembling in the rain. Attendants helped him up and carried him away.

Haren allowed himself a flicker of surprise. Surprisingly weak. Perhaps he'd been sick, though it had surely ended his quest for Ascension. What would happen to him now? They had never been told. Perhaps they sent you home. Perhaps they didn't.

No backward step.

The next one dropped out much later. Then several gave out, all of them collapsing in little exhausted bundles. They were whisked away.

Haren found himself at the front of the group after that. He maintained his pace, careful not to speed up. He attacked the ramps hard, recovering on the far side. He felt his feet become heavier, his chest muscles tighter. He became light-headed, and sensed the first surges of nausea gather. More loops passed, one after the other, hypnotic in the rain.

Amada was next to go, his thin face drawn and agonised. Kenet followed shortly after. Then they were dropping like flies, stumbling into the water or slumping by the side of the track. Haren got weaker. Breathing became harder. His feet ached as they hit the floor, his knees spiked with every impact. Still the second gong didn't sound. He began to yearn for it.

Trevi was on his shoulder by then. Haren caught a glimpse of his face – a rictus of pain. Barely half a dozen still ran with the group. Two more hobbled after them, a long way back.

The pain intensified. More time passed, dragging as if mired in tar.

No backward step.

His vision shrunk down to a long, black tunnel. His pulse thumped, muffled, in his temples. He lost sight of Trevi. He lost sight of everything. He kept moving automatically, cut loose from conscious thought. His jaw hung slack, his arms went limp, bashing against his thighs as he stumbled onwards.

He thought he heard the gong, then realised his mind was playing tricks on him. He kept going, head down, feet dragging. A wall approached, blunt and black in the downpour. He tried to jump up against it, but missed the handholds. He scrabbled briefly, unable to see anything but overlapping circles of red and black, before his frozen fingers lodged into a crack of masonry. He tried to pull up, to drag himself to the top, but something was wrong. His feet found no purchase. The rockcrete blocks were too smooth, too curved.

It took him a long time to hear the laughter. It took him a long time to realise that he'd veered far off the track. It took him even longer to realise that it was no wall he was trying to climb up, but a giant figure of a warrior in white armour and with glowing slits for eyes.

Haren collapsed at the giant's feet, bewildered. The giant gazed down at him, immense and immobile. His outline shone dully from the flood-lumens, glossy with trailing beads of moisture.

'Good,' said the giant, amused. His voice was a low machine-growl. 'You do not give up easily.'

Haren felt himself begin to faint and squeezed his muscles to push blood to his head, desperate not to shame himself. He was shaking uncontrollably. Dimly, he heard attendants running towards him. He wondered how far he'd got before his body had given up.

The giant crouched down beside him. Even stooped, he was huge. Haren saw a massive curved shoulder guard hover above him. It had a wolf's head painted on it, set against a crescent moon.

'Last on your feet,' said the giant. 'Keep that up and you'll be wearing this armour. Sixteenth Legion, lad.'

Haren felt consciousness slipping away. His body ached, his limbs were quickly freezing, his lungs were raw with gasping. He'd never been in such pain.

But as he gazed up at the wolf-moon device and heard the vox-

filtered voice of the giant, imagining himself in a similar suit of power armour, imagining himself marching to war amid the ranks of those peerless fighters, he couldn't help but let slip a smile of pure happiness.

I will become one of you, he thought as his body seized up at last. *For Horus. For Horus and the Emperor, I will become one of you.*

Tamu looked out across the Altak, feeling the wind brush against his bald head. Unconsciously he flexed his fingers, feeling the tough skin of his hands move. His chest ached still. The last implantation had not gone smoothly and he had woken six days ago on the operating table to see the floor of the laboratorium covered in his own blood.

The Apothecary, an owlish Khitan from Choq-tan named Jeldjin, had been concerned for a while.

'I have seen it before,' he'd said, running a scanner over Tamu's puckered scar tissue and shaking his head. 'The flesh of Chogoris, it is tough, but these things were designed for Terrans. We are learning, but it all takes time.'

Tamu had listened silently, gritting his teeth against the pain and refusing analgesics. Jeldjin hadn't really been talking to him. Few of the full battle-brothers ever did. What could they have to say to a sixteen year-old stripling, raw from the grassland, eyes still wide with what he had witnessed in the monastery? Tamu doubted that they ever remembered their own Ascensions. He'd heard it said the memory faded quickly.

Now Tamu had recovered most of his strength. He stood on the edge of the cliffs below the Khum Kharta fortress, breathing deeply again. It already hurt less.

Below him, fifty metres down where the crumbling rocks of the monastery-bastion met the Altak, the plains began: ridged at first like sand dunes, then breaking into the eye-aching flatness of the eternal grass – blue-green, glossy, rustling as the wind eddied across it. The sky arched above, pale and unbroken, bright with diffused sunlight. On the far horizon he could see the eggshell smudge of the Ulaav range, just a whisper against the curve of the world.

Tamu narrowed his eyes. He was a year away from receiving his occulobe implants, after which he knew his eyesight would rival that of the *berkuts*, the hunting raptors that circled the high airs. Of all the changes, he yearned for that one the most. He yearned for the day when he would gaze out across the empty land and see each blade of grass picked out sharply, like a frond of steel.

As for now, I am half-finished, he thought. *Half-boy, half-man. Half-man, half-god. Everything is incomplete.*

He smiled. He liked those contrasting pairs. He would find a use for them in a poem, and that would please the training masters, who liked to encourage the aspirants to adopt one of the Noble Pursuits. Most chose hunting, some Khorchin calligraphy. Only a few had the patience for the spare, hard, compact forms of *ci* verse, and so they had encouraged Tamu particularly strongly.

Half-boy. Half-man. Half-god.

He heard footsteps, and listened for the tread signature. Targutai Yesugei was coming down the citadel steps to join him. Tamu turned his head, watching the worn-earth edges of the monastery's foundations soar away above him. Flags rustled at its summit – the red and gold of the khans, the black and silver of the Imperium.

Yesugei made his way slowly down the wide stairway. Clear sunlight glinted from his armour. Tamu waited patiently, bowing respectfully as the *zadyin arga* approached.

'Feeling better?' asked Yesugei, looking at him intently.

'The implant took,' Tamu replied.

'I was told you were near death.'

Tamu grinned. 'I eluded it.'

Yesugei returned the smile. It did not take much for him to smile. Ever since Tamu had been plucked from the Altak and taken to the monastery, Yesugei's smile had been somewhere close by him, emerging from weatherbeaten flesh the colour and toughness of beaten bronze.

'I remember when I found you,' Yesugei said. 'You had a gash at the back of your head that should have killed you. And you tried to fight me, the first chance you got.'

Tamu bowed his head, embarrassed. 'I did not know–'

'I was pleased. It made me think I had made the right choice.' Yesugei's smile faded a little. 'I will not pretend I do not grieve when our choices are wrong.'

Tamu felt self-conscious. He remembered very little of the time after Yesugei had taken him. He did not like being reminded of it.

He looked down at his hands. They were too big, like most of his body. He already had the bulky frame of a grown man and knew that it would keep getting bigger. The stimulants and accelerants he took in his food made his muscles bunch and swell. At times he felt freakish, like a changeling left out on the steppe to die, all awkward limbs and fleshy growths. At others he felt invincible, bursting with power and energy and desperate to find an outlet for it.

'I have a long way to go,' Tamu said.

'I do not think we will lose you now. I have a superstition.'

'About me?' Tamu asked.

'About the universe,' smiled Yesugei. 'Have I never told you of it? The principle of the minor flaw.'

Tamu shook his head.

'A foolish thing,' said Yesugei. 'I found myself believing that every soul should possess a flaw. Some exhibit it early and survive. Others do not, and it grows, and when it emerges it has become monstrous. The greater the soul, the greater the monster. So it is better to have had your brush with destruction now.'

Tamu squinted at Yesugei in the sun. He didn't know whether he was being serious. 'Then I no longer need worry.'

'Of course you should.'

'And you, *zadyin arga*?'

'My flaws were identified a long time ago.'

'And the Khan?'

Yesugei looked at him sternly. 'He will be an exception to the rule.'

They stood together for a little longer. Yesugei was a companionable soul. It was strange to think of him as he really was: a master of the Arts of Heaven, a zadyin arga of prodigious power. Acolytes whispered along the corridors of the monastery that Targutai Yesugei had killed more men than any of the Legion, other than the Great Khan himself.

Tamu believed it. He was not fooled by the soft voice or the sparkling eyes in that good-natured face. Yesugei was the embodiment of the Legion's core principles: he killed without rancour, without angst, without obsession. His station did not require him to take an interest in the aspirants he had selected, especially as the demands of the Crusade took him away from Chogoris often. The fact that he paid his charges so much close attention had taught Tamu a lesson, one that he had absorbed far more readily than most others – that warriors need not be brutes.

'I am leaving soon,' Yesugei said. 'I do not expect to return before you complete Ascension, and by then your name will no longer be Tamu.'

'Where are you going?'

Yesugei glanced up at the ice-blue sky. 'Where the war leads.'

Tamu felt a sharp pang of jealousy. Ever since he had begun his training he had burned to leave the

home world. He dreamed often of other worlds, of stars burning in the vaults of the deep void, of combat against real enemies rather than drill-drones and sparring partners.

Yesugei gave him a reassuring look. 'We are inducting more Chogorians every cycle. Soon we will outnumber the Terrans. Perhaps it is unworthy to admit this, but I look forward to the day. The Khan is one of us, after all.'

'He was not born here.'

'All the same.'

Tamu considered what Yesugei had said. 'Do they follow the same training?'

'Terrans? I doubt it.'

'Is it easy to fight with them?'

'Easy enough.' Yesugei shot him a wry look. 'We are all united now, of course. All united under one Throne.'

Tamu gazed back out over the plains. 'I can only imagine Terra.'

'You may yet witness it.'

'If I survive Ascension.'

'I told you. You will.'

Tamu flexed the muscles of his chest, breathing in heavily and feeling his ribs ache. 'It cannot come soon enough.'

'Patience,' said Yesugei, resting a gauntlet on Tamu's shoulder. 'Work. Study. Live. Take advantage of this time. Once you are in the *ordu* you will have no space for anything but war-craft.'

Tamu had been told the same thing many times. It had always troubled him. 'Then I wonder why they make us learn so much.'

'It is important,' said Yesugei. 'I am glad you are a poet. Only poets can be true warriors.'

'Do the Terrans think the same?'

Yesugei laughed. 'I do not know,' he said. 'One day you will meet one. When you do, ask him.'

Haren stepped forward as the doors slid open. The chamber beyond was dark, lit only by slants of orange light from the neon night sky. Streaks of rain trickled down the outside of armourglass windows. It had been raining for a long time. It always seemed to be raining in Imamdo.

The man behind the pedestal desk looked up at him as he entered.

'Haren Svensellen?' he asked.

Haren clicked his heels together and stood rigidly. 'Sir.'

The man looked Haren up and down. His flesh was grey and he looked tired. A glitter of augmetics ran down his right cheek, breaking the skin and pinning tight under his jaw. One eye glowed a soft red, the other was natural.

'Your time here is complete,' he said. 'Are you prepared to serve?'

'I am.' The words made Haren swell with pride. The first stage – the selection, the physical conditioning – was over. He felt strong. His lean, immature limbs had hardened, his chest had broadened. More would come – the gene-therapy, the psycho-conditioning, and then, finally, the implants that would make him one with the Legion.

The man looked down at the desk. Runes scrolled down its reflective surface. 'Twenty-sixth out of thirty-two in your cadre. It was a good cadre – you have nothing to be ashamed of.'

'Thank you.'

'But it presents us with a problem.'

Haren felt a twist of unease. Something in the man's cold, clipped voice suddenly made him nervous.

'The Luna Wolves had marked you for selection, but that means nothing until they come to collect,'

said the man. ‘They exceeded their targets, which is not easy. Other Legions have not been so successful. Some are under-strength. If you had made twenty-fifth or higher then it would have been different, but as it stands…’

Haren listened warily. He remembered the wolf-moon device on the Space Marine’s shoulder guard. He’d seen the same image a thousand times in the years since, plastered over every surface in the training facilities, the medicae bays, the tactica lecture halls, the dormitories. He’d begun seeing it in his sleep.

‘You did everything necessary,’ the man went on, methodically, coolly. Haren felt his cheeks begin to flush. ‘Reassignments happen. They are nothing to be ashamed of.’

Reassignment. The word hit Haren like a blow. He heard his blood pumping hard in his ears. After so many years dealing with the rigid ways of the selection facility he should have known better than to question, but the words came out anyway. ‘I do not wish to be reassigned,’ he said.

The man flicked his tired eyes – one brown, one red – up at him. A thin eyebrow raised by a fraction.

‘Are we here to facilitate your wishes, Svensellen?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Is that what we are here for, to facilitate the wishes of our aspirants?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Others have been reassigned. Do you think they felt differently?’

‘I doubt it, sir.’

‘And do you think we made special dispensation for any of them?’

‘No, sir. Sorry, sir. I…’

The man lowered his eyes. Haren trailed off.

One place away. One place.

The man ran a pair of metal-tipped fingers over the desktop, dragging rune-clusters to and fro absently on the touch-reactive surface. ‘You will make the transfer to Luna in two weeks. Onward transport will be arranged there. You will complete your remaining programme with your new Legion. They have been given a full record of your progress with us. You will be welcomed. Our stock is highly prized.’

Haren almost blurted out another protest. *Is there no alternative? No other way? I can re-take the tests! Is this even permitted? I’ve absorbed the doctrine, the training, the methods...*

The man seemed to read his mind and his hands stopped moving. ‘You have at least ten years before you are due to enter a battle company,’ he said. ‘You will adjust. In the decades to come you will forget that this was even an issue.’

That was perhaps meant as a kindness. Haren drew in a long breath through his nostrils, keeping his shoulders in place, his back straight. He wanted to be sick. ‘Thank you, sir,’ he said. ‘And is it… is it permitted…?’

‘It is. You are assigned to the Fifth Legion.’

The Fifth Legion. The White Scars. The mystic savages.

It could have been worse: the Wolves of Fenris, maybe, or the War Hounds. Still, the White Scars...

‘I know nothing of the Fifth,’ Haren said.

‘You’ll learn. A liaison officer will join you on Luna, but you should commit to study before then.’

Haren remained where he was, static, lost for words. The man looked up at him again.

‘Do you need anything else?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Haren, his mind drifting. ‘Do I?’

The man thought for a moment. Something clicked in his augmetic, like clockwork. ‘You’ll change your name,’ he said. ‘That is one thing I do know – they are given new names on entry to the Legion.’

‘A new name,’ said Haren absently. ‘What kind of name?’

The man shrugged. ‘I have no idea,’ he said. ‘You have ten years to find out.’

Tamu moved forward. The lights in the hangar were bright and the rows of warriors in white armour were dazzling, as pristine as the snows on the Ulaav in winter. Every so often he had to remind himself that he was one of them.

One of *them*. One of the Legion. A Space Marine.

Hasik Noyan-Khan stood before him. He held Tamu’s gaze for a moment, scrutinising him. Tamu looked back into Hasik’s brown eyes fearlessly. Despite Hasik’s immense and gilt-edged Terminator war-plate, despite the thousands of warriors standing to attention in the *Dergun*’s cavernous interior, despite the vast display of weaponry around him, he felt nothing but joy.

‘Tamu,’ said Hasik. His voice was a rumbling baritone, made harsh by more than sixty years’ service in the Legion. It was rumoured he was one of the very first to be raised from Chogoris, just as Yesugei had been. Looking up at his hard, ravaged features, Tamu could believe it. ‘Talskar?’

Tamu shook his head. ‘Khin-zan,’ he said, referring to the clan he had been taken from on Chogoris. The Talskar were the Great Khan’s people, but many dozens of nations had been subsumed into the Legion. They were all White Scars now.

‘Show me,’ said Hasik.

Tamu bared his left cheek, exposing the flesh to the hard light of the overhead lumens. Hasik ran an armoured finger down the raised flesh of the scar that stretched from Tamu’s cheekbone down to his chin.

Hasik nodded, satisfied, and reached behind him. An adjutant delivered up the chosen weapon – a two-handed *guan dao* glaive with a disruptor-edged blade. Hasik held it before Tamu as an executioner might, poised to swing.

‘You were Tamu of the Khin-zan,’ he said. His voice filled the huge space. ‘Now you are of the ordu of Jaghatai and your old life is no more. What name do you take to mark your Ascension?’

Tamu had spoken it out loud many times in the days prior to the ceremony, getting used to the feel of it on his lips, trying to ease the strangeness of the transition. When he replied, it still felt jarring.

‘Shiban,’ he said.

Hasik handed him the glaive. ‘You are one with the ordu, Shiban. You are of the brotherhood. You will not leave it except in death – may it be long in coming, and may glory accompany your deeds until that day.’

Shiban took the glaive in both hands. The weapon felt pleasingly heavy in his gauntlets. He ran his eyes up and down the blade, noting the glyphs on the metal, the gilding on the disruptor casing.

It was perfect.

‘For the Great Khan,’ he said, bowing respectfully, his hearts full to bursting.

It took more than ten years.

In all, nearly fourteen passed before Haren was ready. The physical changes were hard, the surgery painful. The cultural ways of the V Legion were too different to be absorbed readily, and he had to learn Khorchin, the strange language of Chogoris. That alone tested him – despite his improved recall and mental agility, getting his tongue around such alien sounds remained a challenge.

It was not just a matter of vocabulary and grammar; Khorchin had inflections and subtleties not shared by any Terran language. His first tutor, a stocky woman from the mega-grav world of Boe-Phe, had developed her own theory on the origin of the differences.

‘They are a poetic people,’ she had told him. ‘Their home is an empty place. It loosened their imagination, so they filled their minds with words.’ She had curled her lip. She did not especially

admire Chogorians. ‘They are prolix. And they do not learn Gothic well, hence all this fuss.’

‘Why is that?’ Haren had asked.

‘I do not know. Perhaps they do not know themselves.’

Haren mastered the speech in the end, just like all the other Terrans who had been inducted into the Legion. The inductees studied together, poring over curved character-clusters and diacritics, rolling their eyes at the complexities and cementing friendships in the face of adversity.

Many of the others had been taken from the Asiatic hive clusters. Haren disapproved of that. After Unity the Imperium was meant to have moved beyond racial and ethnic stereotyping, so the fact that the V Legion remained mired in the physiognomic traits of their backwater world was an irritant.

Much else about them was an irritant also: their archaic customs, their introversion, their exceptionalism. They placed enormous importance on *speed* – on being the first into combat, on being the first out, on movement, on shams and counterfeits.

Withdraw, then return, they told him, over and over again.

No backward step, he would occasionally remind himself.

As time went on, though, Haren learned to admire their tenacity, their toughness, their energy. The combat drills were hard, just as hard as they had been with the Luna Wolves. The Scars could fight, that was certain, and he took some solace in that.

His initial orientation took place in the Sol system. Then he was moved out with the others to off-world training facilities – a decommissioned battleship over Vhomarl, a jetbike squadron billeted temporarily on the lead-hard plains of Yyem, specialist combat units deployed on the aqua-world of Kail IX and the gas giant Revelet Taredes. He performed well throughout. The Chogorian instructors were fulsome in their praise, unlike the grudging hard-men of the Luna Wolves.

‘Take pleasure in your prowess!’ they would chide him, mocking his earnestness. ‘A warrior is a blessed thing, the most fortunate of creatures, gifted by heaven with unmatched power. It would be polite to acknowledge that, from time to time.’

Haren did his best, but their cheerfulness never sat well with him.

They take so little seriously, he thought. *They are playing at this.*

Of course they weren’t. He knew that, but the nagging accusation would not leave him.

‘When are we going to Chogoris?’ he had asked them near the end.

Tajik, his last instructor, had shaken his scarred head. ‘We will not go.’

‘So I will never see the home world?’

‘You will. Just not now.’

Haren had frowned. ‘It seems strange, not to visit the centre.’

‘It is not the centre,’ said Tajik, lapsing into inscrutability as White Scars were prone to do.

‘It is where we are based,’ insisted Haren, using ‘we’ as he tried to do always.

‘We are based nowhere,’ said Tajik, smiling. ‘Nowhere is our home, and everywhere is. That is the difference between us and the others. You will learn it.’

Haren wanted to ask more questions, but merely bowed and let the matter drop. Sometimes it was easier that way.

And so, at last, Ascension arrived. The final ceremony took place in the humid equatorial zone of Taranagea: two hundred aspirants lined up on a rockcrete square as hot rain whipped and skipped across them, each decked out in newly crafted power armour in the V Legion colours of ivory, red and gold. Haren stood among them, feeling much as he had on the sodden training quads of Imamdo.

But now, of course, he was far from being a boy on the cusp of a new life. He was a man.

More than a man. A demigod. An angel. A guardian of Terra’s new order.

Jemulan Noyan-Khan had made planetfall to oversee the Ascension. Like all Chogorians he was compact and wiry even in the standard battle-armour he had opted for on that day. As Jemulan reached

Haren's place in the line, Haren noticed that he was taller than the old lord commander. That unnerved him somewhat.

'Haren,' said Jemulan. 'Which part of Terra?'

'Skandmark,' said Haren.

'Good,' said Jemulan. 'Hard country. I know it. Show me.'

Haren bared his left cheek. The cut had been made just a few weeks earlier by his own hand and was still tender. He had pushed the blade deep, keen that the results would be worthy of a Chogorian's approval.

Jemulan nodded, satisfied, and reached behind him. An adjutant delivered up the chosen weapon – a power sword in the V Legion's tulwar styling. Jemulan held it before Haren as an executioner might, poised to swing.

'You were Haren of the Skandmark,' he said. His voice sounded flat in the humid air. 'Now you are of the ordu of Jaghatai and your old life is no more. What name do you take to mark your Ascension?'

Haren had struggled for a long time to think of one. He had taken advice from his instructors and had spent hours poring over Khorchin almanacs and lexicons. In the end he had chosen a name from Talskar mythology – a servant of an ancient khan who had returned from a hundred years in the wilderness looking as young as the day he had left. The symbolism seemed appropriate.

'Torghun,' he said.

Jemulan handed him the tulwar. 'You are one with the ordu, Torghun. You are of the brotherhood. You will not leave it except in death – may it be long in coming, and may glory accompany your deeds until that day.'

Torghun took the tulwar. He would need time to get used to it; he was still more proficient with straighter blades.

'For the Great Khan,' he said, bowing respectfully and trying to banish, for the final time, the residual memory of a white-armoured giant in the rain, looking down on him with the wolf-moon icon on his shoulder guard.

PART ONE

THE WOLF AND THE KHAN

ONE

The White World
Bodies
Minds

It was possible to remember too much.

Ilya Ravallion had taken a long time to learn that. For a long time she had assumed that most lessons were behind her, mastered in her youth or not at all, back when she had the quickness of mind and body to change as circumstances demanded. It had turned out, though, that she was still capable of evolving, even after her hair had turned grey and her face was creased with lines like the folds of sun-dried fruit.

Chondax had changed everything. The White World, the Scars called it. They liked giving things interesting names. Imperial cartographers labelled it *Chondax Primus EX5,776 NC-X-S*. The 'NC' meant non-compliant, the 'X' meant xenos occupation, the 'S' meant scheduled for visitation by an expeditionary fleet. All of those labels would have to change now: the xenos had been exterminated, and what remained on the surface was as compliant as anything ever could be. The 915th Expedition and all the other fleet elements would soon muster at the jump-points, seeking new assignments, and the cartographers and planetary cataloguers would get to work.

Until then, she preferred the White World.

In her old life she would have found it fanciful. Then again, in her old life she would have found most things fanciful. The Departmento Munitorum was not an institution that rewarded creativity – the logistical arm of the Great Crusade demanded officers with a command of detail, with perfect recall, with a love of statistics and the kind of mind that could manipulate them accurately, quickly, carefully.

That had been her. She had started out at the signals facility on Palamar Secundus as a cypher breaker. The work had been demanding, particularly when it came to xenos codes that skirted the borders of insanity to decrypt. After an initial phase of excitement, she had not enjoyed it – the mathematics were frighteningly intense, as were the colleagues she worked with.

Only when her other aptitudes had come to light did things change for the better. On that day it had been hot and the section chief's office was sweltering. He was in a bad mood: they were behind on their targets and field commanders in six theatres were getting impatient.

He'd rubbed his tired eyes, staring miserably at the piles of data-slates on his desk.

'Now they want figures from the Irax campaign,' he'd said, his voice hollow.

'I remember them,' she had said.

He'd stared at her. 'It was a year ago.'

'I know. I can recite them.'

She still could. The first entries sat in her voluminous mind, ready for access.

Relay point Aleph: Six transports, nine landers, twelve regiments.

Relay point Varl: Three transports, two landers, three regiments.

Relay point Thek…

And on, and on.

That had got her out of cyphers. She left Palamar and transferred closer to the core. Her life became a matter of getting soldiers from one place to another, on time, with ammunition, with food, with support, without confusion. It was repetitive. It was laborious. It was lonely.

She loved it. She climbed the ranks, each promotion getting her a warp-stage or two nearer to Terra. Once the Departmento was folded fully into the Imperial war administration it adopted military ranks. She became lieutenant, then colonel, then, finally, general. She enjoyed the respect that earned her from those in the regular army. They knew what a general was, and what she could do to them if they ever forgot it.

So the campaigns passed, one after the other. The numbers started to boggle even her capacious mind. Thousands of carriers, billions of troops, trillions of lasguns with quadrillions of charger packs. At times she would lie awake at night, tracing the patterns of the Crusade in a giant imaginary web. She would see the expeditionary fleets crawling out along invisible lines towards their destinations, each one bearing statistical tags denoting deployment types and complements. She liked doing that. Parts of that web were her doing. No one would ever know it, let alone record her contribution, but it made her smile nonetheless.

For a long time, that was all she wished for. It gave her purpose and a healthy share of fulfilment. The fact that it was an isolated fulfilment seldom occurred to her. She never missed the presence of a companion, male or otherwise, which in any case would have been an intrusion upon the sense of order that she had created around herself. There was no room for another soul in her life, no room for mess or uncertainty or compromise.

By the time she had begun to question that doctrine she was nearing retirement. Her short hair had been grey for a decade. Her neat, trim uniform bore decorations from a generation ago, and her most junior subordinates seemed to treat her like a relic from a forgotten age.

So these are the choices I have made, she thought. She supposed they were not choices many others would have made, but that was fine – the galaxy was a big place, and the Emperor found tasks for all sorts. It had been a good life, one she could be proud of and satisfied within.

In the end, though, it had taken Chondax to open her eyes.

What had she known about the White Scars? As little as anyone else. They were the elusive ones, the Legion who roamed too far, the ones who had almost broken away entirely, rampaging outwards from the thrust of the Crusade and angling off into the deep void. *Prodigal*, her superior had called them.

It had been a surprising final assignment for her, an unlikely marriage of very un-likes. From Ullanor, in a whirl, then on to the Scars' next campaign, given a service rank and charged with organising the unorganisable, imposing some sense of discipline upon a Legion that treated warfare like a kind of carefree, joy-filled art form. She wouldn't have predicted it.

Halji, at least, had been kind to her. Her assigned adjutant was as diligent and cheerful as anyone she had ever met. It was still easy to be exasperated with the rest – not least the Khan himself – and they clearly found her as amusing as they had from the start, but some progress had been made.

They called her *szu-Ilya*. The sage Ilya. For all its idiosyncrasy, it was hard not to enjoy that.

She missed Yesugei, though. From the start, the Stormseer had been the one to treat her seriously. He was a master of elemental forces beyond her limited imagination, but he had always been courteous, always respectful. Yesugei had seen something in her that she hadn't noticed herself, and it was that, in the end, that had dragged her into the Scars' perilous orbit. It was a shame that he had not accompanied the fleet to Chondax, but such was war.

So it was that she had ended up with her own quarters on the huge Legion flagship *Swordstorm* and had begun the long process of cataloguing assets and rationalising deployment patterns. They didn't always listen, but sometimes they did. They made an effort. They were aware of their shortcomings, and wished to improve.

She liked that. It acted as a challenge to her. She tried to loosen some of the rigours of her past life.

She tried to forget a few things, or at least not to hang on to them too closely. An eidetic life, she found, risked being an arid one. They learned from her, she learned from them, and so she discovered that it was possible to care too much, to insist upon too much. To remember too much.

'I will try to let things go,' she told herself, particularly when tempted by the urge to reorganise some typically scattergun requisition plan. 'In all things, there is a happy medium. Compromise. An open mind.'

She heard a low chime at her doorway.

'Come,' she said, raising her head from her console.

Halji entered, bowing politely.

Ilya still found it odd that they bowed to her. Halji was a third taller than her in his armour, hugely powerful and with a warrior's prowess that almost defied belief. Like all Chogorians, though, he wore his genhancement lightly. A certain kind of self-effacing courtesy seemed to come naturally to them.

'Forgive intrusion, szu,' he said. 'You wished to be informed of progress in Choir.'

Ilya leaned back in her chair. 'I did. Anything to report?'

'No,' said Halji, smiling awkwardly. 'They cannot receive, cannot send. Everything tried has failed. The Mistress of Astropaths sends you her apologies.'

'It's not her fault,' said Ilya, her heart sinking. 'How long has it been?'

'Since arrival in Chondax.'

'We have been here a long time, Halji.'

'Master says blackouts are not uncommon. He says warp is fickle place. Once we were on campaign in Kleimoran and Choir heard nothing for two years. He is not concerned.'

Ilya frowned. The White Scars were cavalier about losing touch with the rest of the Imperium. They liked it. She did not – it made her nervous, as though suddenly deprived of gravity or oxygen.

'Please tell him to keep trying. Perhaps some locations in the system are free of the effect.'

Halji shrugged. 'I will. But he says nothing sent or received for some time.'

Ilya glanced back down at her desk. A schematic of the fleet distribution glowed softly on the glassy surface showing battlegroups spread out widely, running down the last elements of enemy forces that still lingered in far-flung corners of the system. Resistance across the Chondax cluster was coming to an end, and with every standard reporting period came a slew of kill-tallies and compliance certifications. Soon their work would be done here and the next assignment would come. The White Scars would be on the move again, just as they always were.

'We're reaching an end-point here,' she said, half to herself. 'How am I supposed to receive fresh orders from Terra? What will our next move be?'

Halji smiled. 'Do not worry, szu,' he said, as calm as ever. 'Something will come.'

'*Khan, you will wish to see this.*'

Shiban stiffened. Jochi's voice was strained over the comm. That was unusual; Jochi was usually in good temper, even when the bolt-rounds were flying.

But then Phemus IV was the kind of place that got under your skin. There was nothing good to say about Phemus – blisteringly hot, creeping with black-crusted magma and riven with electrical storms. It was like a vision of the underworld given gruesome, uncomfortable form.

'Hold position,' voxed Shiban, noting his brother's location on his helm display and pulling his jetbike round in a wide curve. 'With you in a moment.'

He gunned the drive, sending his mount sweeping across scabs of charred rock. Above him the burned-orange sky sent flickers of forked lighting dancing across the horizon. A bank of chemical-lurid cloud glowered in the magnetic west, underlit with a pall of dull red. Vast plains of jet extended

in all directions, ringed by hunchbacked mountains and streaked with the vomit of an unquiet world.

Shiban crouched low, feeling the intermittent hum and growl of his mount's engines working. The bikes struggled in the smoggy filth. He'd had to change his twice already in a deployment lasting less than a month. That was an irritant. In all the time he'd fought on Chondax he'd never had to submit a mount for maintenance.

The White World had been kind to them. It had been the crucible of the whole campaign, the heart of the greenskin defences. Warfare on that world had been of the most glorious, the most agreeable, kind. Shiban remembered the wide, cold skies; the touch of the salt-like earth under his fingers; the three suns, whose light blended and melded in a soft melange of green and blue and yellow.

He could have fought on that world for an eternity and never grown weary of it. In the end, though, they had killed all there was to kill. The xenos had been exterminated, their bodies burned and their crude structures melted down. When the Legion had left it for orbit, Chondax had looked pristine – a ball of translucent crystal in the heavens, scoured clean of infection.

Now the outlying worlds were the target. Epihelikon, Teras, Honderal, Laerteax; all of them flung far out into the void, all of them infested with the residual taint of greenskin occupation.

Phemus IV was the furthest out, the last to have its fire-licked tectonic plates certified free of the enemy. Every time it looked as if the greenskins were gone, though, another nest would be uncovered, teeming with life and hatred, requiring kill-teams to be deployed and burn-teams to follow them.

Shiban was weary of it. The Legion needed a new challenge, something grand to aspire to. The dregs of a campaign were the worst time.

I hate this world, he thought. *I wrote verse about Chondax. No words shall be written about this place. It deserves none.*

The Khan would move them on soon. Shiban had seen him fight, and so knew the order would come swiftly. He had seen the *dao* sword wielded with such casual expertise that it made his eyes shine to remember. The primarch was less a mortal warrior, more an expression of the elements. He would be restless too, like all predators when the prey was exhausted.

They said that Horus Lupercal was the finest commander in the galaxy. They said that the Angel Sanguinius was the mightiest in combat, or maybe Russ of Fenris, or maybe poor tortured Angron. They said Guilliman was the greatest tactician, the Lion the most imaginative, Alpharius the subtlest.

None of them gave the Khan a second thought. But then, they hadn't *seen* him.

A long time ago, before Ascension, Shiban remembered asking Yesugei why they made aspirants learn the Noble Pursuits when their destiny was for warfare. Now, so many years later, he understood the answer he had been given.

Killing is nothing without beauty, and it may only be beautiful if it is necessary.

He smiled as he rode. The memory lifted some of his torpor.

When the Khan kills, it is beautiful.

He caught sight of Jochi's outline ahead of him, dark against tumescent slag-piles of flickering magma. The light, such as it was on Phemus, was fading to a deep, resentful umber. Distant thunderheads were grinding closer across the plain.

He skidded his bike round and cut the engine, dismounting in a single movement.

'What, then?' he asked, walking over to his second-in-command.

Jochi had kept his helm on, as they all did in that foul place, so Shiban caught nothing of his expression. 'Bodies,' he said.

Shiban glanced at the magma piles. They rose up in bulbous lumps, heaped in steadily accumulating mounds like folds of carbonised fat. Phemus IV was littered with such sites, some as large as starships, produced by the myriad despoliations that the world inflicted on itself at regular

intervals. The hills of slag crept across the cracked surface of the world as if alive, crushing anything they came across.

Three bodies lay at the foot of the pile, one of them still partially enveloped. Each one was encased in coal-black armour, cracked by pressure.

Shiban knelt beside the nearest. He ran his finger along the curve of an arm-guard, watching sooty residue smear away to reveal a line of ivory underneath.

'Which brotherhood?' he asked.

'Of the Talon,' said Jochi. 'Posted here six months ago.'

Shiban looked over the dead White Scars legionary. Many of his brothers had died on Phemus, and some of their corpses had been swallowed by the voracious magma. Even so, it was never pleasant to find another. 'Gene-seed?'

'Not yet,' said Jochi. 'Sangjai is on his way.'

Shiban leaned closer, wiping more of the grime from the battered armour. He smelled none of the putrescence normally found with corpses, just the acrid stink of long-burned material. 'How did they die?'

'This one, by the blade,' said Jochi grimly. 'At the throat. The others, unclear. Possibly torso-wounds...'

Shiban noticed a deep cut through the seals at the corpse's neck. He gently prised the edges apart, seeing the segments pull cleanly away. The edge of the wound was as black as everything else, blistered where thick blood had boiled away.

He took a deep breath. He wondered what the fallen warriors' stories were, how they had been bested, how many greenskins they had fought off before the finish. It was a shame that no tales would be told of their ending.

He looked up and around him. The black land glared back, void-dark and fissured, lit with the ghostly flickers of orange fire. 'Where are the xenos bodies?'

Jochi shook his head. 'No signs. Unless, perhaps, buried deeply.'

Shiban felt uncomfortable. Something nagged at him. 'Odd,' he said.

'Khan?'

Shiban considered it for a little while longer. He brushed more filth clear of the legionary's breastplate, exposing Chogorian glyphs engraved in the ceramite. He let his eyes wander over the broken outline of the cadaver, watching, absorbing, thinking. Eventually, he rose to his feet.

'Three dead sons of the ordu,' he said thoughtfully. 'No *hain* beside them.'

Jochi remained silent. Shiban could sense his uneasiness.

You feel it too.

'They lost their battle,' Shiban went on. 'Tell me, Jochi – what do hain do with the bodies they take?'

Jochi nodded, as if his khan had confirmed something he had also noticed. 'There is no mutilation.'

'And these cuts…' Shiban trailed off. He looked up at the sky. 'When does Sangjai get here?'

'He said within the hour. He is bringing a lander.'

'I want the third one extracted,' said Shiban. 'I want all three taken to the *Kaljian*.'

'What are we looking for, khan?' asked Jochi.

Shiban didn't answer immediately. He stared out across the plain, out to where the atmosphere was curdling into fresh storms.

This world is sick. Its soul is hateful.

'I do not know, Jochi,' he said quietly.

Torghun walked down the corridors of the *Starspear*. His movements were fluid. He barely felt the

wounds he'd taken on Chondax any more. The whole Legion was patching up, making good, and he liked the feel of it. Some of the old disarray seemed to have been purged from the White Scars' planning recently, replaced by what looked like some clear-headed concern for practicalities. He did not know why that was, though whispers ran through the fleet that a Terran had been appointed as a new counsellor to the Khan. They said it was a woman, someone high up in the Administratum, someone with the patience and the stubbornness to take some control over the Legion's erratic direction.

Torghun hoped that the rumours were true. It would be good to see some control imposed. Over the years he'd come to appreciate some virtues of the Chogorian way, but that didn't mean he'd ever found it easy to accept their shortcomings. If someone had finally decided to do something about that, so much the better.

The corridor around him was lit low, barely illuminating the pale walls. He passed a few ship-ratings as he went, all of whom bowed respectfully. They were mostly Terrans, though some from other worlds mingled among them. As time went on the Legion was less drawn from the Throneworld. He'd heard it said that in time all White Scars would be recruited from Chogoris.

Not yet, though the Terrans were a clear minority. It was hard not to become defensive about it. Chogorians were far too courteous for outright hostility – but occasionally Torghun had caught… looks. Or maybe gestures, passed between members of the same culture that he was excluded from by his own ignorance.

Or perhaps he imagined it all. That was also possible.

He reached the chamber he'd been heading for and pulled a hood up over his head. The lumens burned even lower, and the place had the look of a dormant area. The *Starspear* was a big ship, with capacious crew-holds and half-empty weapon-bays, and several decks were underused. He hadn't passed any ratings for some time.

Torghun looked both ways before depressing an entry chime. After a pause, a low voice came over the comm. '*State nature of business.*'

'Open the door, Nozan,' Torghun said wearily.

It slid back, revealing a large space beyond: a hangar, largely empty, also poorly lit, with just a few transit-crates stacked around the edges. The floor was polished to a high sheen and reflected the lumens glassily. Above them, huge in the darkness, hung the emblem of the Legion, the lightning-strike in white and gold.

Thirteen figures waited for him, all Terrans, all out of armour and draped in cowled robes, all Space Marines. They remained still as he entered, completing them, bringing the number to fourteen.

'Welcome, brother,' said one with Hibou's voice, inclining his covered head. 'We were beginning to wonder if you would turn up.'

'I was detained,' said Torghun, taking his place in the circle.

'I hope you were not observed.'

Torghun shot the speaker a withering look, not that he could have seen it. 'What do you think?'

Hibou smiled thinly under his hood's shadow. 'So you have it?'

'Really?' asked Torghun, increasingly annoyed. Hibou was a khan just like him, commander of the Brotherhood of the Dawn Sky. 'Do we have to do this?'

'It is a formality. Then we can get started.'

Torghun shook his head and reached into his robes. He withdrew the medal – heavy, silver, marked with the head of a hawk imposed across a lightning-strike. 'Satisfied?'

Hibou nodded. 'Entirely.' He gestured to the others, who pulled their cowls back.

Torghun knew all their names, their ranks, their companies. He knew each of them better than some of his own battle-brothers. Some matched his rank, though most were below him.

Brotherhoods everywhere, overlapping and contradicting. We have woven a strange tapestry here.

'So we are gathered,' said Hibou. 'Let us begin.'

Torghun drew in a deep breath. Something about the early stiffness of lodge gatherings always wearied him. They were more satisfying once the wine started flowing and the real business could be done.

But that was just him. The others all took it very seriously. He had to respect that.

Soon it would begin, though. The real work.

TWO

Home world
Licking wounds
Outriders

It had all started with Nikaea.

Targutai Yesugei had known it even at the time. Every month that passed only reinforced his certainty. He had been there, with Ahriman, Magnus and the others. He had spoken, he had argued. Much of the debate had taken place in the corridors around the great arena, some of it in the presence of the greatest of all of them.

But after the Master of Mankind had spoken, of course, there was no longer any debate to be had. So many great minds, great warriors – they had all fallen silent at once. Perhaps they should have worried about that then, but no one did.

Something defining had taken place on that world. At times Yesugei thought that a terrible mistake had been made; at others, that one had been avoided. No matter how hard he turned the matter over in his mind, the truth of it eluded him.

He stood now, alone, out on the Altak, watching the wind brush the grass and feeling the sun on his exposed face. The empty landscape of Chogoris yawned off in every direction, unbroken by hill or tree. The vastness of it never failed to make one humble. It freed the mind.

Yesugei had heard it said that the human mind coped poorly with the immense vacuity of his birth-world, and that those who had been raised there were doomed to a kind of madness of insignificance.

He narrowed his eyes, watching the blue-green haze of the horizon blur out of focus.

Significance, he thought to himself. *That is the real madness – to assume that we matter at all.*

He allowed his mind to run free of the shell of his body, drifting out of itself and sighing like a spectre on the immortal wind.

He considered himself.

What do I see?

He saw a weather-worn figure, knee-deep in rustling *rejke* grass. He saw archaic battleplate, reverently cared for but age-blunt at the edges. He saw leather-brown flesh, hard and mottled with ink tattoos; oil-black hair gathered in a topknot; a dome of crystals over his head that flashed and winked in the sun.

He saw the trappings of his craft – a staff, topped with a bleached aduu-skull; the totems, the symbols, painted or engraved on the ivory of his armour.

Look deeper.

He saw the faint penumbra of force in the air, the heat-shimmer of power, the harmonics in his movement. He saw the world respond to him, reaching out, aware of him in its dim, eternal way.

That was all proscribed now. Since Nikaea, such things were to be put away.

He let his mind return to his body. He looked at the world with his own eyes. He breathed with his own mouth, and felt his own augmented lungs take in cold, clear air.

'It is what I am,' Yesugei said out loud. 'I can no more put it aside than I could put out my eyes.'

His brow furrowed, making the long scar down his left cheek twitch.

Something defining had taken place.

It had all started with Nikaea.

The passage of time had passed like this.

On Ullanor, the Warmaster had been invested. Yesugei was there, standing by the Great Khan's side, watching with approval as Horus Lupercal took up the office. The two of them, Horus and the Khan, had fought together to take the system. They liked one another. Of all his brothers, the Khan had only ever been close to two, and Horus was the first.

Yesugei heard them confer in the aftermath.

'I hope that I can call on you,' Horus had said.

'You call, I answer,' the Khan had replied.

Then they had parted. The grand gathering of primarchs and commanders and battleships and officials dispersed, setting course for a thousand destinations and making the warp light up with the trails of their passage. The Great Crusade commenced again, though this time with a Warmaster at its apex, not an Emperor.

The Khan had been sent to the worlds of the Chondax System. He was sent to hunt the remnants of the empire destroyed on Ullanor, the last slivers of Urlakk's greenskins. Perhaps some would have balked at that – it was not prestigious work – but the Khan was happy enough. It was hunting, and in a way that he understood: cavalry charges across open spaces, going up against prey that had no concept of capitulation or self-pity. He had never complained.

Nearly all of his Legion went with him, ranked in their various brotherhoods, eager for the hunt. Scores of white ships cut the void, each crammed with warriors of the ordu, all desperate to get back in the chase.

Yesugei did not go with them. Other duties called. An obscure world had appeared on Legion communiqués during the final phases of the Ullanor campaign. The Sigillite's marker had been on many of them – others were classified, for the eyes of the Emperor's gene-sons only.

That was the first Yesugei knew of Nikaea. Back then he had thought little of it. What was one world amongst the thousands the Legion had already charted? So many worlds had come and gone, falling one by one under the aegis of the ever-expanding Imperium of Man.

But it turned out to be more than that. In the end, it became everything, the fulcrum upon which the fate of a species turned.

He wished he had known at the time. Perhaps he might have found some way to prepare for it better. The outcome might have been different.

'We will look back on this and weep,' Ahriman had told him after the verdict.

Yesugei had nodded. 'You are right,' he had replied.

He walked through the grassland. The stems parted before him like water. Khum Karta was days distant, long since fallen below the smooth horizon. He was in the lands of the Khan now, the old Talskar hunting ranges. Few prey-beasts remained – they had become too good at hunting them, too careless at restraining themselves.

Yesugei thought that if he had taken a berkut out with him, perhaps he would have spied something cowering out in the openness, belly pressed against the earth and ears twitching. Then he could have gone after it in the old way, using the strength of his body and the agility of his mind – no weapons, no weather-magic.

No, that would be a sham. He could never go back. Everything had changed, for better or worse.

'I do not know what to do,' he said out loud, as if the Altak could hear and answer. 'My dreams do not answer. Why is that?'

The wind said nothing. It pushed against him, buffeting across his breastplate and wearing at the ceramite edges of his shoulder guards.

Something strange was happening. He had no words to describe it precisely. He had awoken one

night with the sense that the entire galaxy was convulsing, like some vast creature disturbed in its sleep. He had heard screaming from far away. It had felt as if the screams were coming from worlds on the edge of knowledge, burning like candles in the infinite dark, but that was impossible.

If he had put his gifts aside – as he had been commanded to do – he might have avoided such dreams, but the tests of heaven did not come and go. They were not like clothes that one could discard. They were in his blood, in his breath.

Since the Khan – whom the Chogorians called *Khagan*, the khan of khans – had left for Chondax, nothing had been heard of him. It was as if a great veil had been draped across the sector. No astropaths penetrated the shroud, no communications of any kind came from the other side.

Such blackouts were hardly rare – the way of the warp made any kind of long-range communication unpredictable and prone to interruption – but something about the completeness of it made Yesugei uneasy. Other sectors had also gone quiet. He had heard rumours that the light of the Astronomican was becoming intermittent. The Master of the Orbital Defence Grid on Chogoris told him that some ships had been lost entirely, something that with Legion-sanctioned Navigators was rare.

By themselves such signs were not sufficient to cause alarm, for the galaxy was a perilous place and the Great Crusade had only succeeded in banishing some of those perils. For all that, it was hard to shake the creeping sense of *something happening*.

Yesugei snorted to himself.

Something happening! Can I be no more exact that that?

But he could not. There were no interpretable patterns, no signs that could be read and understood. That alone was cause for concern.

He stopped walking, still knee-deep in grass, alone amid an ocean of nothingness. He saw the tips moving in gentle waves, travelling in ripples like whispers.

Some comfort was in those movements. Such undulations had swept across these lands long before the first explorators had arrived in bulky colony ships, ready to seize mastery of the emptiness and bend it to their will. When the hand of mankind was gone again, as it most assuredly would be one day, the grass would still be there, whispering and undulating in a hollowness of cold air and hard sunlight.

I cannot stay here.

The resolve had been growing for days, and now it reached crisis-point. His orders after Nikaea had been clear: return to Chogoris and await further instruction. He had waited for those instructions a long time, and it could no longer be believed that they were likely to come at any point soon.

Yesugei was, and had always been, the Khagan's counsellor. The two of them had forged an understanding, a way of dancing around one another until the truth emerged. Yesugei knew that he needed the primarch; he flattered himself that, in some less obvious way, the primarch needed him. They had complementary skills. They had shared enough long campaigns and endured enough hardship to trust one another's judgement.

He would not have failed to summon me. Something is wrong. I have lingered here long enough.

No more insight would come to him on Chogoris. He would have to find his way to the Legion, swimming against the turbulent warp currents until the mystery of the veil could be resolved.

From the enquiries he had already made, he knew that would be difficult.

'It's like a storm,' the Master of the Orbital Defence Grid had told him. 'A huge one, eating up systems. I've never seen the like.'

It would have been safer to stay on Chogoris, perhaps wiser too. But safety had never been a concern of his, and ever since Nikaea the limits of wisdom seemed to have been soundly breached.

Yesugei stood square, leaning on his skull-topped staff and gazing up into the clear heavens.

‘I could walk these plains for a lifetime and not find the answer,’ he said out loud, his voice snatched away by the wind and turned to nothing. ‘The time has come to seek it in the void.’

Then he remembered what Ahriman had told him on the last day that they had spent together on Nikaea.

‘Magnus will not stand for it,’ he had warned. ‘Once a mind is opened it can never be closed.’ He had leaned closer. Yesugei remembered how it had been: the closeness between them, the shared understanding between kinsmen of the Librarius. ‘Speak to your Khan. He has always been with us. He understands.’

Yesugei had nodded. ‘I will, when I can, but he can be hard to find.’

‘So I hear. Try, though. Magnus has need of friends, and we have need of allies. Speak to him.’

Since then, nothing. No word from Prospero, or Chondax, or Nikaea, or Terra. It was as if the universe had closed in on itself, holding its breath, tensing for some terrible trauma to come.

Yesugei started to walk again. He would go back to Khum Karta, and from there he would take ship. He had been alone for too long, and now a change needed to be made.

It had all started with Nikaea. He still had no idea where it would end.

Ships gathered like sleek, grey sharks in the void, ghosting on low-thrust above the rusty glow of the Alaxxes Nebula. Dozens of capital vessels hung at rest, immense and turreted, prow-lights blinking gently above the abyss. Each was attended by a school of lesser craft – fleet-runners, frigates, outriders, gunships. All of them had the same battle-burned look, the same scorched enginarium flanks, the same pockmarked hull plates. Some limped along on a scintilla of normal power, enclosed in webs of scaffolding and gun-drones. Others were carved open, exposing striated lattices of inner decks. The flickers of a million arc-welders danced across the honeycombs, pricking the soft murk of the gas clouds.

Only one type of fleet in the galaxy had such a profile. The Imperial Army possessed larger complements – vast conglomerations of swollen troop-carriers and supply behemoths – but they had nothing to compare with such concentrated killing power. Only a Legiones Astartes battlegroup could muster such monsters of murder.

Each was gunmetal-grey, adorned with runes and bearing the shamanic company-signatures of Fenris. Each had been made to reflect the savage hearts of those who piloted them: the prows were muzzles, replete with the curving lines of jowl-snarls over jutting forward lances. They were slivers of ferocity hammered into dagger-shaped lines and given hearts of growling, unending fire.

Hrafnkel was at the centre of the muster, heavier and more brutal than any other, ploughshare-bowed, spine curved with the jagged profile of a thousand defence towers and drive housings, belly lit with the dull light of ruinous weapon batteries. The shadows of its attendants – fleet-tenders, maintenance vessels, shuttles, guard-destroyers – crawled across its colossal flanks like clouds across a mountain face.

Its command bridge was huge and echoing – a dome of bronze and marble supported by pillars of glittering granite. Tiers of decking rose up on the inside of the circular walls, each humming with subdued activity from the thousand grey-shifted crew members at their stations. The central vault, a wide expanse of bare stone under the colossal armourglass roof, flickered with a series of hololith route projections, rotating kaleidoscopes of neon light that swirled and reflected from countless pict screens and observation lenses.

It smelled of stone and leather, the aromas of forge and fire-pit. Naked flames burned in iron grates and stained the walls black. Runes were everywhere – carved into the walls, the floor, even the glass.

One figure dominated that space – the embodiment of every savage aspect that looked down on him, as bestial and magnificent in profile as the vessel he commanded. He was the master, the undisputed alpha-beast.

The primarch Leman Russ, though, did not move. The operations of his flagship took place in a seamless dance around him, like lesser satellites spinning around a gas giant. Every so often his piercing eyes would dart towards some hololith readout or lens-feed. Then they would flicker back, inscrutable and frost-hard.

Two grey-pelted wolves with yellow eyes and grizzled haunches slunk at his heels. Every so often one of them would growl low, sending soft vibrations running across the marble, like the crack of glaciers sliding over scree.

The Wolf King's jarls stood in a loose ring around him, each one a lord of combat in his own right, swathed in pelts and armour-plates and totems. Rune Priests stood amongst them, their bone-white hair and painted skin vivid in the dancing light.

In normal times they might have laughed with one another, growling in jest and challenge, gold-pinned eyes glittering with coarse-edged humour.

No one laughed now. Not since Prospero. Not since they had all slumped to the earth on that fire-scoured world and saw what they had done to it. For some reason, Prospero had been different.

Russ had always laughed before, sometimes with genuine humour, sometimes with a kind of wintry satisfaction in violence. Now he hardly even smiled. The cut lines around his sun-dried face seemed a little deeper.

'So when will we be ready?' the Wolf King asked at last.

Gunnar Gunnhilt, the one they called Lord Gunn, spoke first, as was his right. His voice had grown hoarse since the battle of Tizca; he'd taken a blade across the throat that had kept him under the knives of the fleshmakers for two days.

'Ten days, Terran sidereal,' he said.

'More,' objected Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot, Jarl of the Third Great Company. 'Two weeks.'

'Not good enough,' said Russ.

Ogvai bowed. 'We will work harder.'

The primarch didn't so much as glance at them – he seemed distracted, his mind lost in another place. 'This delay harrows us. We should have been on Isstvan. Now we must respond.'

His jarls did not respond. Some nodded grimly, others looked doubtful.

'Has such a thing happened before?' asked Russ, talking to himself rather than them, his expression caustic. 'Do sagas exist in which the Wolf King was drawn to the wrong place, doing the wrong thing? Has our shame ever been greater?'

Still no one replied. When the silence broke, it was not a jarl who spoke.

'We have no shame,' came a younger voice. 'At least, I do not.'

Heads turned. Russ's twin wolves let slip a snickering purr-growl. The Wolf King's eyebrows lifted. 'Who speaks?'

A warrior of Tra moved forward, pushing his way to the heart of the circle. His face was riddled with new scars. It made him look like a phantom of the old ice, criss-crossed with hexes and witch-marks. His head was part shaven, his remaining hair as black as engine-oil. He had a mournful face. He had always had a mournful face, even before Prospero had dulled the Wolves' animal spirits en masse.

He had no left hand. His armour-clad arm terminated at the elbow in a mess of augmetics and iron caps. A new gauntlet had not been fitted yet – the demands had been many.

'Bjorn, of Tra,' the warrior said.

'One-Handed,' said Russ, nodding in recognition. Bjorn's saga was already being crafted by the skjalds. He had been there with the Horus-daemon and heard the words of mystery spoken by that thing. His stock had risen, and he was being spoken of as if some deep wyrd had locked itself on him. 'That is a poor name.'

‘It suits,’ Bjorn replied coolly, flexing his half-ruined arm with something like pride. ‘It stands for all of us.’

‘You wished to say something?’

‘I am not ashamed,’ said Bjorn, his sad eyes unwavering. ‘I saw the thing that brought us to Prospero. I heard some of what it said. The skjald told me the rest. We ended evil.’

‘No doubt,’ growled Russ.

‘And Magnus was already lost,’ said Bjorn. ‘I speak boldly – he was your brother – but it was right that he die.’

Ogvai, Bjorn’s jarl, nodded slowly, chewing his lip. Russ noticed, and his nostrils flared in anger.

‘We were a *side-show*,’ muttered the primarch. ‘Ferrus is dead. We should have been with him. We could have stopped it.’

Reports of Isstvan V had filtered through to the fleet in broken snatches, blurts of astropathic half-dreams across an ocean of warp storms. Nothing had been reliable, everything needed multiple readings and confirmations, but in the aftermath of Valdor’s departure the hammer-blow had gradually become clear. Now they knew the shape of the tragedy.

The Iron Hands, Salamanders and Raven Guard were destroyed or crippled. The Sons of Horus, Alpha Legion, Emperor’s Children, World Eaters, Death Guard, Word Bearers, Iron Warriors and Night Lords had turned traitor. When the star-speakers had finally confirmed the interpretations, bringing the rune-webs with them to demonstrate the pattern of the scry, it had felt as if the universe were falling apart around them, collapsing into ruin in snatches of strange and incomprehensible gibberish. Even now the shock of it resonated, hanging like a pall of smoke over all of them.

‘We would not have stopped anything,’ said Bjorn evenly. ‘We would have been part of the massacre, and few would miss us.’

At that, Russ almost smiled – the hooked, sardonic grin he used to flash regularly. ‘Aye. Just a few.’

‘The question is,’ said Lord Gunn, ‘what next?’

‘We have Dorn’s summons,’ said Ogvai.

‘*Summons*,’ spat Gunn.

‘That is what we are for, are we not?’ asked Russ wearily. ‘We come when called.’

‘When the Allfather calls,’ corrected Ogvai.

‘And He is silent,’ said Russ. ‘Valdor would not tell me why, but he knew. Of everything that has happened, out of all the mistakes, that wears at me the most. Tell me this – what has happened to the Emperor?’

None of them replied. None of them were qualified to. They averted their eyes and closed their mouths. Only their minds ran with answers – suspicions, guesses, fears.

He is stricken.

He has abandoned the Throneworld.

He is dead.

Russ laughed then, but it was not his laugh of old. It was a strangled, half-committed sound. ‘This is what we need.’ He looked at each of them in turn. ‘I will not take orders from my brothers, only my Father. He will speak to me. We will set course for Terra, not because Rogal demands it, but because we choose to.’

Lord Gunn looked up. ‘When, then?’

‘Five days.’

The jarl of Onn took in a deep breath. Ogvai looked pensive; some of the others doubtful.

Russ glared at them. ‘No longer,’ he said. ‘Return to your ships, do what must be done – in five days we leave.’

His expression remained dark, but somewhere, sunk deep into his lupine face amid the cracked

flesh and golden eyes, a flicker of resentful fire still burned. The dead weight of grief was lifting.

In its place came something else.

'Never, not until now, have I been truly angered,' Russ snarled, and the twin wolves stood up at the sound, hackles raised. 'I am curious to see where it takes me.'

Beorth Ranekborn eased back into the *Fylskiare*'s command throne. He'd slept well enough during the off-shift and felt alert. The servitors and mortal crew in the pits below him were working away quietly, and the entire bridge worked with a calm buzz of activity.

Commanding an outrider frigate like the *Fylskiare* wasn't glorious work. They'd been stationed a long way from the main Wolves muster, and the stellar sprawl of the Alaxxes Nebula was a barely-visible smudge on his rear viewers. Still, it gave him a chance to run the real space engines properly again. They'd taken a hit over Prospero from one of the few surface-to-orbit salvoes that the Thousand Sons had managed to launch, and it had played havoc with his systems ever since. He'd had his tech-priests working on it continually, but the core of the problem continued to elude them.

It really needed the attention of an Iron Priest, but they were all fully occupied with the big capital ships. All things considered, the *Fylskiare* had done all right. Patrol duty on the edge of fleet sensor range was at least *moving*.

'Anything to report?' he asked his bridge-lieutenant, Torve, a sandy-haired *kaerl* from one of Fenris's tribute worlds – he could never remember which one.

'Sensor ghosting at our augur limits,' Torve replied, his honest face looking up for a moment from a cluttered console. 'Probably nothing. Want to take a look?'

Ranekborn didn't, not really, but there was little else to do, and the crew got restive with nothing to occupy them but vector plotting. 'It's why we're out here,' he said. 'Course adjustment?'

'A nudge,' replied Torve, glancing up at a roof-mounted pict screen with glowing lines picked out on the glass.

'Do it then.'

Torve complied. A few seconds later Ranekborn felt the dull whine of the engines altering pitch. It still wasn't quite right – a grinding, rather than growling. Trajectory markers on various pict screens scrolled away, plotting new routes.

'Anything?' he asked after a while, absently adjusting the arm-rests on his throne. Aerolf, his watch-officer, had done something strange to them last time he'd been in command on the bridge.

He watched Torve run more tests. He watched the augur-lenses on his throne console begin to feed him fresh locator runes. He heard the dull chatter of the bridge crew pick up by a notch and saw a servitor down in one of the relay pits insert a spare interface node into a vacant shunt-coil and start clicking excitedly.

'Maybe.' Torve was looking intently at the sensor records. 'Hold this heading.'

Ranekborn sat up a little straighter. He looked up at the real-view ports – a cluster of lead-lined crystalflex panes forming a blister over the upper bridge. He didn't know what he expected to see there. An unmoving screen of stars twinkled back at him, just as ever.

'Yes, something,' murmured Torve. 'Getting something now. This is not a glitch, this is a reading.'

Ranekborn felt the hairs on the back of his hands stand up. 'Detail.' As he spoke he activated priority links to the enginarium and void shield stations.

'Feeding to bridge display,' said Torve, switching his incoming data-stream to the main roof-mounted monitors.

Ranekborn looked up at them. For a moment he saw nothing special – a blurry cubic schematic of local space picked out in glowing green lines, all overlaid with rune-symbols and known vessel courses. It didn't change immediately. Then, just at the edge of augur range where the definite gave

way to the probable, something flickered into life.

Ranekborn clicked open a brass keypad housing on the side of his throne and began punching buttons. 'Void shields up,' he snapped. 'Bring us about, two points nadir. Ensure a line to the fleet.'

The bridge immediately shifted into action – they'd all seen the same thing. The low drone of chatter changed in tone, turning tighter, more urgent, more directed.

'Line established,' reported Klaja, the comms officer.

'Insignia yet?' Ranekborn demanded, keeping a close eye on the *Fylskiare*'s trim and heading – it would be a bad time to lose the enginarium. 'Hull-markings? I'll need to give them something.'

'Almost there,' said Torve, working furiously at his console. 'They're still a long way out, but… Yes. Here we are.'

The picts updated. Something resolved in the corner of the screen, shot down data-lines to the cogitators. A single shape shuddered into clarity on the tactical display, rendered in glowing lines of phosphor. The pict was poor – taken at an angle and extreme long range, partly shadowed by the overhanging lip of what looked like a lance housing – but it was there.

A many-headed snake, rearing up against a circle of gold.

'What is that?' asked Torve, twisting to look up at Ranekborn.

Ranekborn felt his pulse pick up as he looked at it. 'I suspected you hadn't read my intelligence briefings,' he said stiffly. 'That's a new one. They seem to want to announce themselves.'

He patched into the comms station. As he did so, more pin-points of light started to spread across the augur-cube – first a few, then dozens.

'Priority message to command,' ordered Ranekborn. 'Perimeter sighting of hostiles. Major deployment. Tell them we're scanning further before withdrawal. Assumed intercept course.'

He watched the points of light continue to grow, like bacilli multiplying on a specimen dish. The numbers were getting more than uncomfortable.

'Ensure we pass those images on,' said Ranekborn, his voice hardening as he calculated how long they had. 'Make sure they take them. Tell them it's a traitor fleet.'

He swallowed, wondering how operational the ship's weapons really were.

'Tell them it's the Alpha Legion.'

THREE

The Lords of Terra
Players of games
Legionary blade

The Observatory had been built in the north-east reaches of the Imperial Palace. Its domed roof was lined with turquoise mosaic tiles shining in the light of a hundred candles. Esoteric devices on the curved surfaces sparkled and moved with the soft play of shadow.

It was not easy to see what was picked out by those designs – astrological symbols, perhaps, or maybe mythical beasts from a forgotten age of Terra. At the very summit was shadow, a lacuna out of the reach of the candlelight. A face had been created there a long time ago but the detail could no longer be made out. It sat in the darkness, gazing featurelessly down on the floor below.

The Observatory had not been used to scry the stars for a long time. Ancient brass telescopes, orreries and astrariums cluttered the aisles, unused, most of them covered in heavy tarpaulins. Rosewood cabinets were locked. The dust on the bookcases was a finger-width thick.

The floor was marble, a chequerboard of ivory and sable, and the walls around it glittered with faded gilt. Twenty pillars sustained the dome above, each with a stone emblem carved into the capital. Some were illuminated clearly – a wolf, a serpent, a lion. Others were obscured.

Three lords stood in the centre. Two were titans, their huge frames enclosed in extravagant shells of armour. The third was hunched and frail.

For a long time they did not say a word. Their silence seemed immense in that place. It seemed as if the first one to speak might shatter the walls and bring the dome down upon them.

The first to break the calm was the tallest and the most physically imposing. His face was slabbed and hard, crowned with a shock of white hair cropped close to the skull. His golden battleplate looked as solid as the stonework around it – its owner might just as well have been one of its statues. A thick cloak hung from his shoulders, pooling darkly in the flickering half-light.

‘Anything?’ he asked.

The speaker had many names. From his origins on the ice-world of Inwit he had been Rogal Dorn. Later he was the primarch of the Imperial Fists. In recent times he had slowly become accustomed to being the Emperor’s chosen praetorian.

His voice had the timbre of a hammer thudding into timber. It was the voice of a man who desired nothing more than to man his ships, to rally his Legion and head into the void to face the enemy that he knew was coming.

And yet that was the one thing, the *only* thing, that he had been expressly forbidden to do. It was a strange burden, to be condemned by one’s own expertise.

‘The Sigillite has not spoken,’ answered the second figure.

This one was scarcely less imposing. His armour had the same baroque quality the Observatory had – decorated with the phases of moons and symbols of what might have once been called the occult. Like Dorn he was clad in gold and bronze and enveloped in rich fabrics of crimson, and yet where Dorn seemed as solid as the bedrock upon which the Observatory rested, this one seemed somehow more ephemeral, more liable to burst into sudden movement. Words of power had been painstakingly engraved into his elaborate battleplate – ancient words, in characters so small that they might have been the near-silent whispers of spectres.

This man's full name was so long that it could not be contained on a single sheet of bronze. He most commonly answered to a single version of it: Constantin Valdor, Captain-General of the Legio Custodes. When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly quiet. His eyes, though, were never quite still, flickering almost imperceptibly, forever searching for the next threat to be countered.

'No, I have not,' said the third. 'I am struggling to find something to say that has not already been said.'

Malcador the Sigillite had none of the grandeur of his companions. His robes, though richly made, were simple. The staff he leaned upon looked to be made of little more than iron, though the aquila device that topped it was artful. His voice gave away his physical weakness – it sounded destroyed by age. None, save perhaps the Emperor himself, knew just how old he was. He had no known birthplace, no cultural identity. As far as the wider Imperium was concerned, he had just *always been there*, as solid a presence as the Palace itself.

Malcador and the Emperor. The Emperor and Malcador. They were like light and dark, sun and moon – each as inscrutable and unknowable as the other.

Except that the Emperor was gone, locked away in the deep Throne chambers, his unmatched power deployed to an end that even the Lords of Terra did not speak of openly.

'Then let me tell you again,' said Dorn. 'Perhaps you have forgotten where it is that we stand. Magnus has broken the wards around the Throne, and now this, the mightiest fortress in the galaxy, sits upon a foundation of madness.'

'It is contained once more,' insisted Malcador. 'For now the world knows little of the actual truth.'

'It is contained only because the Emperor binds Himself to the hidden war,' Dorn replied. 'This respite has been bought with the sacrifice of a thousand souls. *That* is why the world does not know.'

'Not yet,' said Valdor bleakly. 'But they will. Perhaps a few more weeks, perhaps months, but it will spill out eventually. Rumours are already running wild.'

'It will do,' agreed Malcador. 'But as long as He holds firm…'

'Yes, as long as He holds firm,' said Dorn, bitterly. 'That is what we are reduced to. No actions, no movement – just hope.'

'We cannot help Him,' said Valdor. 'We know this. So let us turn to what we can do.'

Malcador chuckled dryly. 'I never asked you how it felt, Constantin, to see Prospero burn. Did even your callous soul blanch at that?'

Valdor didn't miss a beat. 'No. It was necessary.'

'Was it?' sighed Malcador. 'I did not give the order. I wanted Magnus censured, not destroyed. What was it that made Russ do it? You never could give me an answer.'

Dorn exhaled impatiently. 'You know all of this, Malcador. You know all that happened there, just as we do.' He was coldly furious. 'Does this need repeating? The Warmaster is at the heart of it, poisoning everything we do, and now he has the blood of three more Legions on his hands.'

At that, Malcador seemed to wince. The slaughter of Isstvan V was still raw. None of them, save the implacable Valdor perhaps, could refer to it without provoking that hollow, draining, sense of loss.

'Ferrus is truly gone, they tell me,' admitted Malcador. 'Vulkan and Corax missing. Eight Legions declared traitor, even now carving the void apart to get to us.' He smiled grimly. 'Shall I go on? The aether in turmoil, blighting the Astronomican and making us blind? No word of Guilliman or Sanguinius. Are they with us? Or have they also turned?'

'Not the Angel,' said Dorn, firmly. 'And I will not believe it of Roboute.'

'But they are lost to us, for now at least,' said Valdor. 'So we must survey what we know. Russ is at Alaxxes. When I left him, they were badly mauled, for the Sons gave us a hard fight, but they will hunt again.'

'And the Lion,' said Malcador. 'What of him?'

‘He pursues his private feuds,’ said Dorn. ‘And when has he ever been anything but his own master?’

Malcador smiled. ‘You brothers – such a nest of rivalries. I warned him to make you sisters, that it would make things more civilised. He thought I was joking. I wasn’t.’

Dorn didn’t smile. His face seemed permanently rooted in a kind of frozen tension.

‘There is one other,’ said Valdor quietly.

‘Ah, yes,’ said Malcador. ‘So easy to overlook the Khan. Why is that?’

‘It is his gift,’ said Dorn dismissively.

‘The Khan was in the Chondax system,’ said Valdor.

‘Which, like so many others, is beyond our reach,’ said Malcador, his voice bleakly humorous.

‘What of Jaghatai’s loyalty?’ asked Valdor.

‘I did not know him, not well,’ said Dorn.

‘None of us did,’ said Malcador. ‘That was the point of him – in any system there needs to be uncertainty.’ He smiled at Dorn. ‘You, my friend, were an exercise in the opposite. No wonder you two did not understand one another.’

‘So who was he close to?’ asked Valdor.

Malcador thought for a moment. ‘Horus, of course. They were so similar. I believe they conferred on Ullanor.’

‘Magnus, too,’ said Dorn, somewhat hesitantly. ‘They fought alongside one another for a long time.’

‘Yes,’ said Malcador, nodding pensively. ‘The Librarius – the Khan, Magnus and Sanguinius were behind it. That was the root of their connection, such as it was. They all believed in the need for psykers within the Legions.’

Valdor took a deep breath. ‘So there it is. The Khan’s known allies, Horus and Magnus, traitors both.’

‘All of us trusted Horus,’ said Dorn.

‘Quite,’ said Malcador ruminatively. ‘As I said at the time, Nikaea was the root of this. We should have explained things better, though there were *reasons*, some of which we could never disclose, not there.’ He pursed his thin lips. ‘We were too caught up in what needed to be done. That may be the tragedy of it all – we did not explain.’

Dorn looked at Malcador coldly, as if he fully agreed. Valdor remained as implacable as ever.

‘Too late for regrets,’ said Malcador wearily. ‘We must summon him. Russ and the Khan standing here beside you, Rogal, would make me sleep easier. The Executioner and the Warhawk – that would give even Horus pause.’

‘Chondax has gone dark,’ warned Valdor. ‘But I can instruct the astropaths to focus their efforts there.’

‘And if he fails to answer?’ asked Dorn.

For a moment, neither Valdor nor Malcador answered. The space around them seemed to shrink a little.

‘Then we must assume that Jaghatai has fallen too,’ said the Sigillite at last, no trace of wry humour left in his voice. ‘Another name to add to the tally of the lost.’

Ilya sat back in her chair after placing the ivory token. Her move had taken her a long time. With so many places to choose from, and so many tokens at her disposal, they always did.

Her opponent shook his head. ‘Poor choice.’

‘Really?’ she asked, waiting to be shown why.

‘Yes,’ he said, reaching over the large, square board to position a black slate counter. She studied

the results. They became sobering – he was close to capturing a straggling, kidney-shaped slice of territory, and there was almost certainly nothing she could do about it. The choice therefore became simple: to fight the inevitable, or carve out some new area of her own elsewhere. It was a choice she had become used to making.

'I don't see the possibilities closing, not in time,' she complained.

'That is the skill of it. But you're getting better.'

Ilya allowed herself a brief glance at her opponent, checking to see whether he mocked her.

As ever, it was hard to tell. Jaghatai Khan lounged back in a low-slung seat of furs and leather, limbs loose, his proud face as inscrutable as stone.

Ilya remembered when she'd first met him, back above Ullanor. For some reason she'd nearly fainted, even after Yesugei had warned her about it. It was said that primarchs sometimes had that effect – the force of their superactive souls strained at the bonds of sense. She had also heard it said that the human species had never evolved to cope with presentations of such power within simulacra of their own bodies. The effects were well-documented: nausea, light-headedness, panic.

That had all passed now. Spending time with the primarch hadn't become mundane – it could never become *mundane* – but it was containable. The flutters of anxiety in her stomach now rarely troubled her. Their conversations had become a trifle less formal. They shared a glass of wine from time to time. They played games.

'Am I really getting better?' she mused, picking up another ivory stone and pondering where to place it. 'I think you tell me that so you don't lose an opponent.'

'Qin Xa plays.'

'Does he ever beat you?' she asked.

'He's very good.'

'I'll take that as a *no*.'

The primarch's physical presence could be a distraction. It wasn't just the size of him, though there was something inescapably incongruous in addressing a man nearly twice as tall as her. It was more the unconscious… *splendour*.

The Khan was lean, rangy, cut harshly like the talons of a hunting bird. He spoke sparingly. When he did, his voice was cultured, tinged with an aristocratic idiom. His face was long and sleek, dark-skinned like all Chogorians and framed by long black hair. The scar that ran down his left cheek was pronounced, the zigzag of an old wound. Ilya heard that the legionaries had to add poison to the knife cut to get it to scar, for their superhuman flesh otherwise healed too perfectly.

He took care over his appearance. His cloak was trimmed with white fur: *ermyet*, it was called by his fellow Chogorians. He wore a kaftan of deep burgundy, lined with silk. Bands of gold sat on his fingers, around his neck, enclosing the topknot of glossy hair.

Even out of armour he looked dangerous. The folds of his clothing failed to hide the warrior's training of the body beneath. Every movement he made, whether reaching for more *chinyua* wine or setting his own stones in position seemed to take place in a refined world of swordsman-like precision.

Halji had told her about it many times. 'Nothing is wasted,' he had said, sweeping his tulwar though the air in front of her to prove the point. 'Every movement as efficient as muscle allows. No flourish, no flair. Just the principle.'

The Khan, fittingly enough, seemed to have perfected that.

'Do you wish me to give you a piece of advice?' he asked.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. 'By all means.'

He sat back in his oversized chair. The light around them played with the gentle movement of candles. The strains of a Prosperine silverharp sounded faintly in the background. The Khan was very

fond of music – an enjoyment he and Magnus shared, so they said.

'You play regicide?' he asked.

Ilya nodded.

'Not as sophisticated as Go,' said the Khan. 'Regicide gives you one enemy, one trajectory – kill the Emperor, you are the victor. In Go there is no Emperor to kill. Or perhaps it is better to say there are many Emperors.'

Ilya listened. She thought the White Scars tried too hard to explain the superiority of their cultural preferences. They were so used to being overlooked and ignored; something of that must have sunk into their psyche somewhere.

'My warriors are trained by this game,' the Khan went on. 'They learn to see threats from all sides. They learn to counter many targets.'

'I can see that,' said Ilya. 'Damn it. I struggle to keep everything in my head.'

'You do very well.'

'There must be times, though… Times, in reality, when you *do* have one enemy.'

'It is easier for a subtle mind to adjust to simplicity.'

Again, that edge of defensiveness.

That is because you know you are seen as barbarians.

Ilya sighed, and placed her stone. It would probably do little to stem her losses; she expected to be given back handfuls of her counters fairly soon. 'So what is the next target?'

The Khan studied the board. 'After Chondax? I do not know.'

'No orders from the Warmaster?'

He did not reply. He hadn't spoken about Horus since the final stages of the conflict on the White World, though before he had often mentioned him. Qin Xa was the same. She knew that they hadn't received any firm news from the Warmaster whilst on Chondax – she would have seen the logs – but something, perhaps some half-heard star-speaker vision, might have eked its way through.

It was as if they were all starting at shadowy rumours, fragments of uneasiness that moved through the void like gossip between infantrymen.

'So do you have plans?' Ilya asked, wondering if she would get a clear answer.

The Khan stared intently at the stones, not lifting his eyes. 'I feel the need to speak to Yesugei again. If we cannot make contact soon, then we will need to make our way home.'

Ilya smiled. 'Really? You'd bring the whole Legion to Chogoris, just for him?'

The Khan did not smile. Smiling was rare with him, which was odd: the rest of the Legion hardly ever stopped. 'Of course I would.' He placed his stone, predictably enough beginning the encirclement of another of her dwindling groups. 'I have relied on Yesugei for centuries.'

Ilya took a sip before moving again. The wine wasn't very good – Chogorians didn't really appreciate viniculture. 'So why didn't he come with us to Chondax?'

'He was needed on Nikaea.'

'Nikaea?'

'A summit.' The Khan gave her a shrewd look. 'I would have been there too if I could have been, but Yesugei was my representative. He spoke for me. You see how much I trust him?'

'I do. What was he doing there?'

'Arguing for the right of the zadyin arga to exist. I hope he was successful.'

'And if he wasn't?'

The Khan shrugged. 'It makes no difference to me, but I would prefer that my more assiduous brothers don't have to make a difficult choice.'

Ilya smiled. She had come to find the White Scars amiable indifference to Imperial edicts more endearing than exasperating. They weren't rebellious, exactly, just *themselves* – no more, no less. Out

alone. Unconcerned. They would never give up the Stormseers.

'The ruling could have gone against you months ago,' she observed. 'We would have no idea.'

'Lots of things may have happened about which we have no idea,' said the Khan. 'That is the advantage of this agreeable place.' But the primarch's expression faltered for a moment then, as if he knew, or perhaps guessed, something more than he said.

'Do you wish to tell me more?' Ilya asked carefully.

'I do not,' the Khan replied, putting his stone down and launching a fresh attack on her beleaguered positions. 'Now concentrate. You are nearly dead.'

'So tell me what you think,' said Shiban.

The body of the dead legionary lay in front of him on a slab of steel, rendered in uncomfortable detail by the overhead lights of the *Kaljian*'s apothecarion. His armour had been cut away and the flesh inside was black, like overcooked meat.

Jochi stood beside Sangjai, who rubbed his chin.

'Progenoids gone,' Sangjai said with regret. 'The heat.'

'How did he die?'

'You can see for yourself,' said Sangjai, moving up towards the warrior's neck and parting the flaking folds with gloved hands. 'A single blade thrust down to the spine. He was held in place while they did it.'

Shiban leaned on his hands. 'Ever seen an ork make a wound like that?'

'I do not know. Do they make wounds a certain way?'

'You have seen the way they fight,' said Jochi. 'They mutilate what they kill.'

'Perhaps they did not have the chance,' said Sangjai.

'They had plenty of time,' said Shiban. 'That is not the issue.'

Sangjai looked back at the corpse. He studied it long and hard. He bent over and stared at the wound again. Shiban heard a faint whine as his augmetic left eye adjusted focus.

Eventually Sangjai straightened. 'It could have been hain. I have seen them use a blade well enough. But yes, perhaps unlikely.'

'What, then?'

Sangjai looked at him evenly. 'You want my guess?'

'Say it,' hissed Jochi impatiently.

'This is a long knife cut. A legionary blade. They knew where to angle it. It was done quickly, and they trusted the lava to hide it.'

Shiban nodded. He felt vaguely nauseous. 'Anything else?'

Sangjai shook his head.

'Legionary blade,' murmured Jochi, appalled. 'They were fighting among themselves?'

'Who knows?' said Shiban.

'There was nothing on Phemus but greenskins,' Jochi went on, getting increasingly agitated. 'Greenskins and us. Did they go mad?'

'That's enough.'

'How many died this way?'

'*Enough,*' Shiban snapped.

He pushed away from the table. His mind crowded with thoughts. Phemus IV had taken a long time to pacify, far longer than it should have. The expedition fleet commanders had put it down to the hostile terrain, but Shiban had seen the campaign logs prior to his transfer, complaining of higher casualties than expected, poor communications, regular setbacks.

They were fighting amongst themselves?

Hard to believe. Tensions always existed between the brotherhoods – he had experienced them himself – but not to that extent. Never to that extent.

'This cannot be ignored,' he said at last. 'I am going back down.'

'The cleansing is over,' said Sangjai doubtfully. 'We have our recall orders – the Khagan will move the fleet soon.'

'Comms have been bad for months,' said Shiban, smiling bleakly. 'If we are slow in answering, he will understand.'

'You will not solve this,' said Sangjai. 'Not on Phemus.'

Shiban started to walk away.

'You have to start somewhere,' he said.

The mysteries of Phemus are laid bare.

FOUR

Helridder
Into the storm
Betrayer

It took a long time for a fleet formation to respond to orders. Legiones Astartes battle cruisers were gigantic things – kilometres long, like dark cities in space. Building them was the labour of decades, drawing in millions of workers and thousands of Mechanicum creation engines. Once sent into the deep void they continued to grow, to evolve, to change. A ship's own forges were never still, never at rest.

Moving one was an exercise in logistics. A million crew-serfs needed to be at their stations, priming weapons, activating power coils, manning command nodes. Thousands of line officers needed to make their decisions, ensuring the enginarium caverns delivered drive to the thrusters at the correct pitch and frequency. Hundreds of section commanders needed to keep track of the relative movements of other ships and feed a trillion augur readings to the cogitators and sensors to prevent collision with other behemoths manoeuvring ponderously in the void.

But in the end, even the biggest warship was driven by a single soul – a lone captain, gifted suzerainty by the Imperium's relentless drive towards hierarchy in all things. One voice gave the order to move, to train weapons, to light the black with the world-burning power of lances and torpedo volleys.

The order was given, the ships moved.

Across the VI Legion fleet, every ship fired up low-burn engines and sent void shields shimmering down snarl-edged flanks. Escorts raced ahead, engines blazing, machine-souls eager for the hunt. The true giants lumbered in their wake, wallowing as they came about before gunning drive-trains into life.

The shoal of sleet-grey ships spread out, slotting into assault formations. Fire-angles were established in all directions, a three-dimensional sphere of destruction spreading from the centre. The rust-red bloom of the nebula suddenly glowed with a thousand points of intensity, swiftly extinguished as the fleet pulled up into attack speed.

Ahead of them, thousands of kilometres distant and out of unaugmented visual range, the Alpha Legion did the same. Their vessels were similarly gargantuan, similarly bristling with weaponry of almost absurdly destructive potential. Some vessels were adorned with new Legion symbols – edged with sapphire and emerald, the sigil of the striking hydra. Others still bore the colours of fidelity, crowned with the old chain-linked Alpha-Omega device. As ever with the XX Legion, nothing had been entirely settled. Everything was still in flux.

Bjorn watched the enemy from the bridge of the *Helridder*, studying their formation, noting the patterns. The two fleets still weren't visible to one another in the real-view ports – his images were the grainy, poorly resolved feeds from long-range augurs.

He didn't feel any particular emotion. Prospero had been the same – a task, much as countless others that the Wolves had been given; something to be carried out efficiently. Only later had the dull sense of wrongness fallen over them.

We are outgunned, he thought.

He performed rough calculations in his head and knew that the strategeos in the flagship would be

reaching the same conclusion. They would already know how many more ships the Alpha Legion possessed and how quickly their lethal complements could be brought to bear.

'We are outgunned,' said Godsmote, just a fraction behind, standing next to Bjorn on the command plinth of the bridge with the rest of the pack. He was in his armour, the dirty grey of it streaked with bloodstains and ritual kill-marks, and his voice came tinnily from behind his helm's death mask.

'Looks that way,' agreed Bjorn, studying the incoming feeds.

'Wise to meet them head-on?'

'Probably not.'

Godsmote grunted. No use questioning a decision once it had been made, and the Wolf King hadn't been in any mood to back down from another fight no matter how badly mauled they were.

We are a blunted blade, thought Bjorn bleakly. *We have been used too much.*

All Legions had taken casualties during the Great Crusade, but some assignments had been bloodier than others. The Wolves numbers had never been among the highest, a feature exacerbated by their aggressive drive to limit recruitment to Fenris, and their constant deployment – usually self-appointed – to some of the most arduous warzones of the campaign. Prospero had hurt them further, perhaps more than they truly understood.

'I wondered if it would become easier,' Bjorn mused.

'If what would?' asked Godsmote.

'Killing another Legion. Killing kinsmen.'

'We're not there yet.'

'Yes, we are.'

Bjorn already saw how it would play out: comms would be transmitted from the *Hrafnkel* to the Alpha Legion flagship demanding that they stand down. No answer would come back. The Space Wolves would hold fire until the last moment, right up until the range of the main lances had been reached, issuing demand after demand. Then the killing would begin.

Helridder would play its part. It was built for fast-attacks: agile and weapon-heavy, sparsely crewed and with scant berthing for anything but fuel and ammunition. The entire legionary complement on board was six. A lean pack, but one in command of an agile hunter-killer.

'They're moving to an attack spread,' noted Godsmote, glancing at the screens.

'Strange, isn't it?' Bjorn watched the pulses of green light crawl across his tactical readout, creeping towards one another with deceptive slowness – the velocities were now incredible. 'What do you know of the Alpha Legion?'

'Not a lot,' said Godsmote.

'Ever heard of them mounting a major fleet action?'

Godsmote paused. 'Should I have?'

Bjorn shrugged. 'I've never heard of it. Not really what they're known for.'

To the extent that anything was known about the Alpha Legion, it concerned subtlety, subterfuge and infiltration. Guilliman, famously, thought little of them. Russ, less famously, thought much the same. They didn't like getting their gauntlets bloody, it was said.

Once the news had come in from Isstvan V, once it had been given time to settle, some treacheries had seemed more obvious than others. The World Eaters he could understand. The Iron Warriors similarly, and so too Mortarion's strange Death Guard.

But the Alpha Legion. Something about their switch of allegiance bothered him. It felt… unsound.

'Why are they here, doing this?' Bjorn asked, speaking as much to himself as to Godsmote.

Godsmote smiled bleakly. 'Looks obvious.'

Bjorn didn't smile. Even before losing his hand to the daemon he had never smiled much – now, less than ever. He knew that the packs laughed about it, poking fun at his unremitting seriousness, but

they could laugh as much as they wanted.

He felt a weight on his soul, sometimes – like an anvil resting on his chest. He'd sit on the edge of the fire-circle while the others sang or recited, listening but not speaking. For a long time he'd not envisioned himself becoming an integral part of the Legion, just one of its fringe elements, destined to die in some blood-drenched campaign on some world or other.

Now that feeling had left him. Oddly, just as everything changed, his old sullen desire for withdrawal had ebbed, replaced by something else. After time long spent on the fringes, Prospero had begun to draw him into the Rout's heart. The primarch knew his name now. The sagas mentioned him, guaranteeing a kind of immortality in the cold halls of the Aett. It felt as if the centre of gravity had shifted, dragging him closer towards the savage embrace of a Legion whose temper had always contrasted so badly with his own.

'It is not obvious,' said Bjorn. 'Not to me. There are mysteries here.'

The lights on the bridge began to lower. From somewhere far below a warning chime sounded. Guns were being hauled into position, firing solutions were being calculated.

Far ahead, in a slender line on the very edge of vision, the first pinpricks of light from the enemy positions crept into the real-viewers, like a string of jewels slung against the void.

'Well, that may be,' breathed Godsmote, his voice already heavy with relish. 'But here they come, and for myself I wish only to discover how they die.'

Yesugei leaned closer to the viewport and watched the plains of Chogoris fall away into a pale blur. For a few moments after takeoff he'd been able to see the Khum Karta monastery laid out below him in all its sprawling glory – the old towers of the Khitan, the training grounds, the gardens ripe with plum trees. Gold pinnacles had glinted in the sunlight. Soul-pennants had snapped in the stiff breeze.

Then it was gone, lost in a haze of pale greens and browns. He watched the Altak stretch out, spreading out across the continental mass, devouring everything. Only a few wisps of cloud scudded across the emptiness, ephemeral against the vastness.

All worlds looked much the same from space. The colours varied, but the real differences were all hidden in ground level details – the smells, the feel of the gravity, the taste of the wind. Yesugei had trod upon a hundred different worlds and none had ever really resembled another. Humanity had spread itself across a bewilderingly wide range of habitats, conquering each one with the remorseless patience and ingenuity that was, so he had come to learn, the mark of the species.

Soon Chogoris ceased to look different from any other planet – a blank sphere hanging in the uniform blankness of starlit vacuum, its distinctiveness lost.

Yesugei turned away from the viewport and settled back in his chair. He never enjoyed leaving the home world. Before the Master of Mankind had arrived and brought the Great Crusade to them, Yesugei had been quite content with the limits placed upon them by a single world. They had enemies to fight, kingdoms to lay low, prey to hunt; he had never wanted for more than that. The Khan had been the same.

He remembered talking to him once as the moons rose, back in the old days when Khum Karta had been a tenth the size and built of red-tinged stone rather than underpinned by rockcrete and steel.

'What will we do when all enemies are conquered?' Yesugei had asked, feeling warm dusk breeze against his skin.

The Khan stood on the parapet, his long, lean frame proud against the lowering light. By then he was the master of the whole continental mass, the conqueror of the Khin-zan, the Qo, the Khitan, the Nyomen and a hundred other nations.

'Let them go again,' he said calmly. He flexed his fingers against the red balustrade. 'I have no desire to become their master.'

Yesugei laughed. ‘Then why conquer at all?’

‘Because we must.’ The Khan looked up into the heavens. Perhaps he knew what would be coming soon, the arrival that would change everything. ‘We hunt, because we are hunters.’ His expression became sour. ‘There is no point in saying, *This is it, this is the end, you have achieved what you set out to do*. The world will not remain still around you. You move with it, or you are swept away.’

Yesugei looked up at his master. The Khan’s physicality had never lost its power to impress. Everything about him was demanding. Some of the men of the ordu were already calling him *khan tengri*, tantamount to bestowing godhood. Yesugei couldn’t blame them. They’d all seen what he was capable of.

‘I do not know if I believe that,’ Yesugei said lightly. ‘You rule the land from here to the ocean. You will not give it up.’

The Khan turned his eyes on Yesugei. Those eyes, too, never lost their terrible power. Yesugei remembered when he’d first seen them, recovering in a fire-warmed ger after the powers he’d been born with had nearly killed him. They were like a god’s eyes – deep-set, unconsciously scrutinising. Pitiless.

‘I will, one day,’ the Khan said softly. ‘Do you know what I fear, Targutai?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Only beasts fear nothing.’

Yesugei smiled. ‘Decrepitude, then.’

The Khan nodded. ‘You do know me, zadyin arga.’ He looked back out over the plains. ‘Decay is the enemy. Every emperor we have deposed has been fat. They reached the limits of their power and sat back on golden thrones, satisfied with what they had done when they still had vigour. By the time we came for them, they could barely lift a tulwar.’

‘You will not become fat,’ observed Yesugei. ‘I do not think you are capable of it.’

The Khan shrugged. ‘My body, perhaps not, but my mind?’ He seemed to shudder, not from the cold – it was still warm – but from a lack of motion. Yesugei had noticed it before: he needed to be moving, out on the saddle, chasing something down. ‘There is only one unforgivable lie. That is the lie that says, *This is the end, you are the conqueror, you have achieved it and now all that remains is to build walls higher and shelter behind them. Now,* the lie says, *the world is safe*.’

The Khan shook his head. ‘All emperors are liars, Targutai. *Safe*.’ He spat on the balustrade. ‘No fouler word exists.’

That exchange had been over a hundred and forty years ago. Since then, of course, everything had changed, but Yesugei had never forgotten it. Sometimes he wondered whether he might ask the Khan about it again, seeing if he had revised his views. He doubted it: the Khan’s moods and temper seemed burned into him, like the Talskar imprint on his left cheek.

The lander neared its destination, and banked around for the final approach. As the starfield wheeled past the viewports, Yesugei caught a glimpse of the transport he’d requisitioned: the Legion frigate *Sickle Moon*, its spear-shaped profile standing starkly, picked out by the white livery and gold-red trim. The lightning-strike sigil, the mark of the khans for a thousand years, had been painted proudly along the forward flanks.

It looked fast. That was good – it would need to be.

The lander swept up towards the frigate’s dorsal hangar, guided by twin lines of strobing lumens. Once touched down inside, Yesugei stirred himself, got up and walked down to the lander’s embarkation ramp. He took a moment to smooth his robes and collect his staff before emerging out into the hangar – appearances were important, and despite everything that had happened the Legion still placed store in its Stormseers.

The lander’s outer doors hissed open. The hangar was lit brightly, as was usual on V Legion

warships. Every surface was highly polished, glistening softly under hanging lumens. The interior smelled of steel polish, engine oil and *falang*, the Khitan ceremonial incense. Two lines of White Scars stood to attention on either side of the ramp, clasping their fists across their chest in the ritual greeting.

Still they respect us, even after all this foolishness, thought Yesugei as he descended. He found the display of respect touching. *I am glad to belong to such a Legion.*

The ship's commander inclined his head as Yesugei approached.

'Welcome, zadyin arga,' he said. 'You honour us with your presence.'

Yesugei bowed in turn. 'I have taken you away from important duties.'

'You have saved us from tedium. We are happy to have you.'

The two of them walked together towards the hangar's exit. Behind them servitors began to unload the lander, hauling grav-crates from the cargo bay.

'So can you get me to Chondax?' asked Yesugei.

The commander gave an equivocal gesture. 'We will try, but you know about the storms. The Navigator says nothing can be promised.'

'When has a Navigator ever said different?'

'That is true.'

'And you have me with you now,' added Yesugei. 'It has been a while since I peered behind the mask of heaven.'

'This is a good ship,' said the commander firmly. 'A harmonious ship. Twenty major engagements since first launch and still harmonious.'

That was reassuring. Chogorian captains had taken all sorts of esoteric concepts up into the void with them since their sudden and enforced leap in technological progress, and ancient ideals of harmony and balance still counted for a great deal.

They reached the far end of the hangar and Yesugei paused before a set of double doors. 'What is your name, commander?' he asked.

'Lushan.'

'Khitan?'

'Yes, from Xiam.'

'From the beginning, then, Lushan, let there be no secrets between us. This turmoil is not natural. I do not understand its origin, but it makes our star-speakers deaf and dumb, it silences the galaxy and it masks the primarch. Defying it will certainly be dangerous. I say this only so you are aware.'

'All of us are prepared,' said Lushan, looking perfectly unconcerned. 'We can head out to the jump point on your command.'

'Good,' said Yesugei, opening the doors with a gesture. 'Then do so now. My dreams have been troubled – until I am reunited with the Khagan I fear they will become worse.' He gave the commander a weary look. 'And it would be nice to have some sleep.'

Torghun strode towards the *Starspear*'s command deck. He was curious. It wasn't common for Jemulan to call the khans together. The noyan-khan preferred to run his fiefdom in the Chogorian manner: loose control from the centre, maximum autonomy extended to the various brotherhoods. Now, though, the order had come in and his commanders were hastening to comply. Those stationed on other vessels had taken shuttles over to the *Starspear*; some still located in the outlying regions of the cluster had arranged to be present by secure lithocast.

'What do you think?' asked Manju, his lieutenant, walking alongside him. His face, light-complexioned and framed by blond hair, was creased with uncertainty. It was a markedly youthful face for a Space Marine, one upon which the Legion-scar looked oddly out of place.

‘No idea,’ said Torghun. He’d heard rumours that the astropathic veil was beginning to fracture, that some messages were beginning to get through at last, though nothing firm enough to place any confidence in.

‘The new assignment?’ offered Manju, his tone giving away his hope.

‘It would be about time.’

As was typical, the White Scars straggling Legion structure made coordination difficult – many brotherhoods were still engaged in the last gasps of xenos cleansing out in the far reaches. Others had been in their ships for weeks, hanging in orbit over the White World with nothing to do but practise their bladecraft in cages until fresh orders were issued from the *Swordstorm*.

The Chogorians seemed happy enough with that. They were used to their inscrutable primarch and his impulsive decision-making. The Terrans took it harder, at least those who hadn’t long resigned themselves to the Legion’s haphazard methods of command and control.

‘I thought they’d improved things,’ said Manju. ‘The Terran they brought in.’

‘She’s just one woman,’ said Torghun, smiling wryly. ‘She can’t change it all.’

They passed from the corridors into a capacious antechamber crowned with a high dome of glittering crystal. Fleet attendants bustled across the floor clutching data-slates, stepping clear of drone-like servitors in their paths. On the far wall was a Legion lightning-strike inlaid in alabaster and slate. The sigil of the Horde of the Earth stood next to it, a stylised mountain-peak modelled, so Torghun had been told, on Temudan, one of the holy peaks of the Legion’s home world.

Below the sigils were the huge doors of blast-grade adamantium that led into Jemulan’s audience chamber. Two warriors of his keshig stood on either side of the entrance carrying heavy glaives. Their faces were hidden behind sloping grilles of Mark III power armour, the helms crested with horsehair plumes dyed black.

Other summoned khans were making their way through to the chamber beyond. Their shoulder guards carried their brotherhood emblems: a double-headed arrow, a falcon, a dawn sky. At the sight of the last one – a golden sun with spear-tip rays – Torghun’s gaze met Hibou’s.

Torghun nodded his head fractionally in greeting. Hibou did the same.

Once they were through, the blast doors shuttered closed behind them. The chamber glistened from reflective white walls. Bronze-caged lumens hovered above head-height. Perhaps seventy White Scars stood on the tiled floor, though some outlines flickered with the crackling aura of hololithic projections. A low murmur of expectant discussion rippled across the gathering.

Jemulan entered the room last and ascended the dais at the far end. The noyan-khan was as imposing a presence now as he had been when he had presided over Torghun’s Ascension. The many intervening decades had only hardened his ravaged, hawk-sharp face, making the zigzag scar on his face even whiter. His battleplate was ancient, reverently maintained but carrying its own sets of cherished burns, chips and dents.

‘Brothers,’ he said, turning to face the crowd and bowing perfunctorily. His face looked haggard. ‘My earnest thanks for attending at such notice. I know you are diligently preparing for the next stage of the Crusade, wherever that might be.’

Torghun and Manju exchanged brief glances. Jemulan sounded exhausted, as if fresh from combat. His voice, for the first time Torghun had ever heard it, gave away the old warrior’s age.

‘I would not have called you together had it not been of signal importance,’ Jemulan continued, sweeping his weary eyes across them all. ‘I wish the news I have to give were better. I wish it were not…’ He faltered, then recovered himself. ‘I have come from the *Swordstorm*. I have spoken to the Khagan. He wished me to tell you all how proud he is of your achievements here. He knows how much blood you have shed. He told me it will be remembered.’

Something has happened, thought Torghun, narrowing his eyes. *He can barely bring himself to tell*

us.

‘As you know, the astropaths have been out of contact with the Imperium. The darkness is lifting now, though only partially. For reasons we do not understand, star-speakers on the flagship are receiving visions again. Our interpreters have been working hard to decipher them. Some images are still hard to discern, but at least we are getting them.’

Jemulan paused, seemingly unsure how to continue.

This is good news, surely. Why is he so reticent?

‘I hardly know how to tell you what we discovered,’ said Jemulan. ‘Since there is no way to tell it well, I will tell it plainly – the Great Crusade has been split. Treachery. The unthinkable has happened – a primarch has fallen into madness. A world lies in ruins and loyal warriors have been butchered. We do not know how many Legions are involved. We do not know why this has happened, but we are being asked to intervene, to leave Chondax.’

Jemulan’s words were as heavy as lead ingots. No one in his audience spoke, no one responded. Torghun, just like the rest, stood dumbfounded. A collective paralysis seemed to grip the chamber.

‘As I speak to you, others across the expedition are being told this news. Our orders are to accelerate the muster and bring the fleet back to a war-footing. There is much we do not know yet, but this much is clear – *heresy* has emerged among the Legiones Astartes. The only remedy is to root it out. This means war. This means going after those who until this day we called brothers. Their guilt is clear. They are murderers. They are *faithless murderers*.’

Jemulan spat the final words out with venom. His gauntlets clenched, trying to still hands trembling with fervour.

The crowd began to murmur again. Their initial shock gave way to a terrible curiosity – the basic mortal need to have questions answered, to know in all details what had taken place. Some instincts had not been quelled by the rigours of their transhuman conditioning.

‘Who?’ rose from the floor – first in lone voices, then as a chorus. Torghun found himself joining the clamour almost by default, adding his voice to those raised in outrage and disbelief. ‘*Who?*’

Jemulan raised his hands, stilling the tumult. His expression remained dark.

‘This is what we know,’ he said as the chamber fell quiet again. ‘The home world of the Thousand Sons has been destroyed, the Legion annihilated. Magnus the Red is slain, his back broken and his city lain waste.’

Jemulan looked as if he half disbelieved what he was saying.

‘These tidings come from the hand of the Warmaster himself, bearing his signs of surety,’ he said. ‘They are the first authenticated sendings we have received since the veil fell, and though much remains to be determined, at least now we know the name.’

Jemulan’s dark visage swept the chamber, animated by pure fury – the fury of a betrayed comrade in arms.

‘Only death awaits the traitor,’ he proclaimed. ‘So shall it be for Leman Russ, betrayer and heretic.’

FIVE

Voidwar
The medal
Unanswered questions

Bjorn planted his feet apart, compensating for the sudden tilt of the bridge deck. The *Helridder*'s grav-structure coped well with sudden shifts but it wasn't perfect. His assembled pack – Godsmote, Urth, Eunwald, Angvar and Ferith – adjusted stance automatically, eyes fixed on the tactical readouts.

'Come about, five points zenith,' Bjorn commanded. 'Take it out.'

Shudders ran down the chamber's walls, the kind of ripple-vibrations that might have shattered a less robust structure. Already the armourglass forward blisters were cracked and two servitor-manned stations had lost power from ruptures below.

They were being hit hard. They were hitting back hard. Such was voidwar.

Every screen filled with signals. Twin fleet profiles sprawled across the void in a clogged swarm of eerily silent explosions, radiating out from the skeletal corpses of burning starships. Escorts died like firecrackers, igniting in blue-white flares of detonating engine cores and shooting through formations of the battle cruiser giants. Bigger warships – frigates, destroyers – powered through the debris, backs aflame, broadsides flickering with a thousand pinpricks of las-discharge. Then came the leviathans, their void shields smeared with feedback splashes the size of asteroids, their lances vomiting crystalline beams of killer energy.

No communications had been received from the Alpha Legion flagship – no demands, no challenges, just a wall of white noise, followed by the first volleys of las-beams across the vacuum. The Wolf King had no need to give any further orders. His Legion responded with the frustration born of enforced inactivity, launching itself at the enemy like *baresarks* of the old ice.

'More speed,' growled Bjorn, watching the carnage unfold, plotting lines of evasion and attack, his gold-pinned eyes shining.

Another shudder ran through the deck as the lances fired. The forward scanners disappeared for a fraction of a second, lost in a white-yellow blaze, before clearing.

The target lay ahead and above them, burning hard to escape the *Helridder*'s pursuit. It wasn't much smaller than its hunter – a sapphire wedge of burning adamantium, limned with bronze swirls and carrying a ragged-edge wound along its ventral hull plating. Squadrons of gunships buzzed around its outline, some of them as grey as slush, some gleaming like jewels in the night. Coronas of las-fire surrounded them all, whiplashing against the prey's half-buckled shields and slicing through the solid armour beneath.

The target was haring for the cover of an Alpha Legion cruiser formation up ahead and the *Helridder* went after it, engines swelling. Both ships had taken damage, and every second spent in the maelstrom of venting plasma and raking las-spears added to the tally.

'Can we get it?' mused Godsmote eagerly, bracing himself against another yaw of the bridge.

'Ten more seconds,' snarled Bjorn, desperate not to see it get away. He would have to pull out before they came within range of the cruisers, and that would anger him.

'Incoming Stormbirds to port,' reported one of the servitors flatly.

'Losing port void seven,' intoned another.

'Lances at ninety per cent.'

‘Diverting C-deck lumen power to drive relays.’

The information washed over Bjorn, just part of the incoming barrage of tactical data. He felt the tremble of the ship beneath him, shivering like an animal, adjusting course on his every command.

‘Getting a lock…’ reported the master gunner, his half-augmetic head buried in a wiry nest of pict screens.

Ahead of them the target bucked and wheeled. The *Helridder* followed it tightly, corkscrewing through the backwash of a dying mass conveyer before shooting clean ahead and gaining space.

‘Now, gun-master,’ warned Bjorn, leaning forwards, bracing himself against a granite wall. ‘Now or never.’

‘Got it,’ the crewman confirmed, yanking a control column and swinging round in his swivel-mounted seat.

The *Helridder*’s forward lances opened up. Twin lines of coruscation impaled the enemy’s blazing engine-quarters.

‘*Hjá*!’ roared Urth, cracking a fist into his gauntlet’s palm.

The target exploded, blasted apart by one chain-linked detonation after another, and its ship-corpse keeled over, spinning out of control as fuel chambers were sucked into the destructive orgy.

‘Away now!’ commanded Bjorn. ‘Away and down.’

The *Helridder* plunged into a steep dive. Fresh targets hove into view, interspersed with incoming enemy markers. A three-dimensional tumult raged unabated about them, swirling and interlocking.

‘Ship-kill,’ reported the gunner, grinning like a child as he ran sensor checks on the target’s spreading debris. ‘By the Allfather, a fine ship-kill.’

‘Stormbirds still closing,’ repeated the sensorium servitor. Its voice sounded more suitable for reporting a minor fuel leak in the bilge-level redundancy coils.

‘How many?’

‘Twenty-four. Close formation. Firing imminent.’

Bjorn cursed under his breath. Stormbirds were a threat to a vessel the size of the *Helridder* – fast, heavily armoured and carrying all sorts of imaginative payloads. ‘A broadside, gun-master. Do not let them get in tight.’

The *Helridder* jerked in mid-trajectory, kicked by a sudden burst from the sub-warp drives. Like a wounded dog it tumbled over itself lengthways, falling into what looked like a terminal dive. At the last minute it righted, some hundred kilometres above the heaving carcass of a crenellated battle cruiser in Fenrisian livery, and thrust hard to starboard.

The escape figure had been expertly performed, angling the port gun batteries up at the incoming lines of Stormbird gunships.

‘Flay them,’ ordered Bjorn coldly, watching the enemy scream in closer.

The *Helridder*’s ranked guns erupted, peppering the blackness with a barrage of torpedo trails. Stormbirds crashed through it, some erupting into blazes of ruinous fire-trails, some weathering the conflagration and powering clear.

‘Again.’

A Stormbird blew apart on the attack run, its debris flung out in a wild, tumbling arc. Another ran head-on into a projectile cluster and dropped away sharply, engines guttering out. One of them got a clean shot off, overloading one of the *Helridder*’s rear void shields with a single precision strike.

Then, just as abruptly, the squadron altered course, angling up and thrusting in unison across the *Helridder*’s dipping prow.

‘Track them,’ ordered Eunwald.

Bjorn spun around to the sensorium operators. ‘Belay that. Keep close sensor sweep.’

One of the command staff – a woman with flame-red hair and iron-cast eyeballs – swivelled to

look up at him. ‘We have boarding torpedoes incoming. Nine.’

Godsmote cursed. ‘They were screening them!’

‘Guns to port,’ ordered Bjorn, glaring at the gunner.

The gunner was already in action, coordinating the close-range cannons, filling the danger-zone with a dense thatch of crackling las-beams. The boarding torpedoes exploded in a ragged line, the flashes of their demise lighting up the *Helridder*’s scorched armour-plates starkly.

‘Did we get them all?’ Bjorn demanded, grabbing a cable-mounted pict screen and swinging it round.

His answer came in the form of five heavy hits somewhere far below, punching like bullets through leather. The ship shivered as its skin was broken.

‘The only gap in our void shields,’ breathed Godsmote appreciatively as he looked at the glowing impact markers. ‘What an aim.’

Bjorn unlocked his axe from its back-strapping and flicked the disruptor field into blue, glimmering life.

‘You have the bridge, shipmaster,’ he said, his voice already descending into a battlefield growl as he addressed the senior officer on the bridge. ‘Run those gunships down, then look for cover from Ogvai’s battlegroup.’ Then he turned on his heels, beckoning to the pack as he did so. His movements were loosening, gearing up for the close work he’d been bred for.

‘Come, brothers,’ he snarled. ‘We have snakes to skin.’

Shiban looked down at the excavation site. He would have to speak to Hasik about it, but needed more information; all he had at the moment were half-formed suspicions, none of them convincing.

‘Khan!’

The hail came from the far end of the site, a few metres from Shiban’s vantage point and down in the pits carved by his warriors. A dozen of them still laboured at the lava-face, drilling into the semi-cooled and glowing rock with plasma weapons and heavy chainblades. They had found a few more elements from the slain White Scars patrol – fragments of armour and jetbike components. Above them the sky glowered like a hot oil slick.

Shiban scrambled down the slope. Time was short. If they didn’t turn anything up soon then he would have to call off the operation and return to the *Kaljian*.

‘Tell me you have found something useful, Chel,’ he said, approaching one of his warriors stooped at the foot of a slope of semi-cooled lava.

Chel turned towards him. ‘Perhaps.’ He held up the mangled remains of detonation charge casings, and a few shrapnel fragments. ‘These were buried further up.’

Shiban looked them over. He had used similar devices himself, many times; they might have been used to collapse the walls of a lava channel, redirecting the flow. Perhaps the patrol had used them, prior to their final battle. It was impossible to tell for sure – the pieces were little more than blackened shards.

‘And this,’ said Chel, extending his gauntlet.

Shiban took up a metal disc less than half a palm’s width. It was heavy, ridged at the edges. He turned it over, then back again. One side was blank and the other had a hawk’s head engraved on it. The workmanship was not sophisticated – it reminded of him of tribal ritual images from home, although the style was not recognisably Chogorian. The surface was pitted and tarnished, and he couldn’t identify the metal from touch alone. Whatever it was, it was clearly robust to have survived the heat.

‘Where was this?’ Shiban asked.

Chel pointed up the slope. ‘Where we found the last body. The auspex nearly missed it.’

Shiban looked back at the medal. It seemed innocuous. The dull light of Phemus reflected from its mottled silver face like an echo of old blood. His skin, insulated beneath the ceramite of his gauntlet, pricked with sweat.

'Seen anything like this before?' he asked.

Chel shrugged. His body language gave away his doubtfulness – he wanted the excavation over and saw no purpose in digging more ground away from the bodies of slain brothers.

Shiban turned to the rest of the squad, holding the medal up. 'Any more of these?'

No answers came. They gazed at it blankly, their demeanour much the same as Chel's.

Shiban closed his fist over the medal. 'So be it. Not much of a return.'

He glanced up the slope to where the hunchbacked outline of the Stormbird waited for them. As he did so, his comm-link crackled into life.

'*Khan,*' voxed Jochi. '*Transmission from the fleet.*'

'Relay it.'

Jochi hesitated. '*It might be better if you come back up. They want us back. Everyone back to Chondax. No exceptions. Something has agitated them.*'

Shiban felt a chill. That sounded familiar. He remembered how the Khagan had stood amidst the ruins of the greenskin fortress on Chondax, bending his head to listen to some troubling tidings from his keshig.

Something has agitated them.

But that was some time ago, and he couldn't say that he would be sorry to see the back of Phemus.

'Understood. Ready the *Kaljian* for transit.' He cut the link and turned back to the squad. 'We are done here, brothers. Our next assignment, heavens willing, will be more rewarding.'

They started to move out, and Shiban gazed over the site one last time. It was a poor graveyard for those who had fallen. He looked down at the medal again. He liked nothing about it – something about the way it had been made offended his aesthetic senses.

'Hateful world,' he muttered, trudging back up the slope to where the Stormbird waited to take them back to Chondax.

Bjorn jogged down the *Helridder*'s transit corridors, closely followed by Godsmote and the others. The six Wolves were followed by two ten-strong units of kaerl ship-guards, each wearing carapace armour and hefting a heavy autogun. The clatter of massed boot-falls echoed messily in the confined spaces – this far down, the capillaries were narrow, poorly lit and hanging with cables.

Bjorn's glowing axe lit the way in stark, pale blue. Its energy field rippled and snarled, already eager to tear into ceramite. The weapon's name was *Blódbringer*, and he carried it in his right hand, his left still being an unfinished matrix of gears and metal spurs.

One-Handed, he thought grimly. *This will be interesting.*

Godsmote loped close by carrying a chainsword in his left fist and a bolt pistol in the right. His armour looked devilish in the flickering blue light.

'They're close,' he said.

Bjorn grunted. He didn't need to be told that – he could hear it from the bolt-clashes and screams up ahead. The boarders had worked fast, not bothering to fight their way up to the bridge but heading down as quickly as they could, going for the sub-light engines. If they stopped *Helridder* moving then they'd have killed it as surely as if they'd let off charges in the heart of the warp engine ducts.

It was a decision that Bjorn might have made in their place. Fighting another Legion was an unsettling experience: they thought like he did, were as quick as he was and almost as familiar with the layout of his vessel. It was like fighting a mirror.

The Thousand Sons had been different. They'd already been half beaten once the Space Wolves had

made planetfall, and their defence had been desperate and messily, confusedly defiant. The Alpha Legion had no such disadvantages: they were in better shape than the Wolves, better resourced and with the advantage of the initiative. They had coming looking for this fight, for reasons that even Russ hadn't fathomed with any precision.

We understand so little – they hold all the cards. How has this been allowed to happen?

Bjorn reached the end of the corridor and burst through the doors into a massive, half-ruined vault. Octagonal walls soared up into the darkness, enclosing a shaft over a hundred metres high. In the centre stood a principal power-relay for the sub-warp drives – a hulking spire of pipe-webbed ironwork and glowing plasma conduits. It jutted up into the roof-space in a grotesque thrust of industrial majesty, wreathed in forks of electrical discharge that sent streaks of lightning dancing across the chamber.

Bjorn's helm display gave him five targets, each in scale-patterned power armour, each knee-deep in corpses and charred engine components. The enginarium defence crew were down to a few dozen mortal warriors, hunkered down behind whatever cover they could find and firing furiously.

'*Hjolda*!' roared Godsmote, thundering across the pipework floor towards the closest Alpha Legionnaire. The pack fanned out in his wake, aiming with precision, adding to the furious volley of shells already ricocheting off the enemy's power armour.

Bjorn was faster. He raced across the chamber, veering around piles of debris and swaying through the bolts loosed at him by the legionaries. Two shots connected – one glancing off his pauldron, the other cracking his vambrace. That made him stagger, but not lose speed.

'*Heidur Rus*!' he bellowed, feeling spittle lace the inside of his helm.

This was *his* ship, *his* environment. Everything about it – the shouts of guttural Fenrisian from the warriors, the stink of oil, brazier-coals and blood-wet pelts, the savage aspect of the raw, unfinished ironwork – was home ground. Such things were important.

He crashed straight into combat, trading blows with *Blódbringer* and knocking the first Alpha Legionnaire back a pace. From the corner of his eye he caught Urth tearing into another; Angvar had fallen back and opened fire with his bolter.

'This is no place for you,' Bjorn snarled, working his axe blade with fury, giving the legionary no time to do anything other than parry. '*Traitor*.'

The enemy said nothing – no taunts, no jibes. His masked helm was blank and unmarked. He fought expertly, swiftly, countering the axe blade with a disruptor-shrouded gladius. When the weapons clanged together, the energy fields snarled and spat, sending throbbing vibrations down Bjorn's arm.

Blood raged thickly around his system, fuelling a hot burn behind his eyes. He *hated* the warrior before him: he hated his silent efficiency, he hated his brazen effrontery in coming to *his* ship, and above all he hated the lack of explanation.

Why are they doing this? Why are they here?

They clashed again, blades ringing from the impact, both swung with equal strength. Bjorn's hatred was the only difference between them, and in the end that made the difference – his blows were fractionally wilder, fractionally harder to predict.

'Allfather!' he roared as *Blódbringer* plunged down a final time, cutting through the legionary's last, hasty defence and biting deep into armour-cables. The energy-field tore through them, issuing a hiss of escaping gases, swiftly mingled with an aerosol spray of blood. Bjorn dragged the blade in deeper, severing the warrior's neck in a froth of mingled gore and coolant. The Space Marine crumpled, gasping for a breath that would now never come.

By then Bjorn was already moving, leaping over the twitching corpse and seeking new prey. Godsmote and the others were busy with their own fights, locking the enemy down on the chamber floor amid the echoing clash of hard weapons-fire.

The last Alpha Legionnaire had broken free of the battle, racing over to the power-spire and leaping up at it, lit gaudily by flickering blades of arc-lightning. Bjorn went after him, mag-locking his axe and sprinting to the base. The two of them clambered up the filigree of pipes, racing up it like rats on a hawser.

A bolter-blown rupture in the spire's outer shell yawned above them, revealing a glowing grille that seethed and fizzed with barely contained energy. Forks of plasma lashed against the edges, silhouetting the approaching legionary and licking against the moving shadow of his power armour.

Bjorn pulled himself higher, hampered and made weaponless by his single functioning hand. The legionary was almost at the rupture, poised below the lip with his fist clutching a brace of krak grenades.

A full detonation could take the whole chamber out, dragging half the enginarium with it and leaving the *Helridder* crippled and drifting.

Bjorn halted, planting his boots solidly. Braced, he retrieved the axe from his back, hefted it, then threw.

The axe flew end over end before *thunking* solidly into the Alpha Legionnaire's back. The edge pierced deep into his backpack, cracking open the protective housing that covered the suit's power cabling, and the lines shorted with a burst of crackling discharge.

The legionary spasmed as if paralysed, suddenly inert and twitching. His grenades, unprimed, fell from his outstretched hands.

Bjorn hauled himself upwards, clambering level with his enemy. Robbed of a weapon, he curled his hand into a fist.

'Get *down*,' he snarled.

The Alpha Legionnaire could do nothing to avoid the blow – Bjorn's gauntlet slammed into his helm-mask with the force of a forge-hammer, hurling him away from the spire's flank to crash down upon the deck.

Bjorn leapt down after him, driving his armoured knee into the legionary's stomach as he landed. Then he punched again, and again, smashing the warrior's face until the eye-lenses were shattered and his head lolled back in a thick slough of blood.

Bjorn ripped the helm free, exposing a ruined and pulped face within. One eye had been torn from its socket and was little more than a well of bubbling blood. The legionary's breaths came in a wet rattle.

'*Why*?' Bjorn hissed.

The Alpha Legionnaire looked barely conscious. His one functioning eye focused weakly on Bjorn, and something like a weary smile flickered across his bleeding gums.

Bjorn felt his rage flare. 'How long were you planning this? Ullanor? Before?'

The legionary coughed up more blood. His eye lost its focus.

'Do *not* die!' roared Bjorn, grabbing him by his charred scalp and rocking his head back and forth. 'Why are you here? Give me a reason!'

He wanted to *hurt* him, to pour out some of the agony of betrayal, to inflict damage upon those who had ripped the Imperium open.

The legionary lost his smile. He didn't laugh or spit defiance or promise vengeance. He just lay there, slowly dying, his ruined face resigned.

It was then that Bjorn smelled it, the faint tang of nerve toxins, fast-acting, already in the blood. The warrior hadn't planned on being taken alive.

I hate this Legion.

Bjorn lowered his helm towards the legionary's face, as if inviting a confidential whisper. He could hear the last breaths of his victim, soft and untroubled.

‘Tell me, brother, just one thing.’ Bjorn spoke then as one warrior to another, desperate to extract something – anything – concrete. ‘Why are you doing this?’

At that the dying legionary looked regretful, as if he wished he could do better but protocol restrained him.

‘*For the Emperor*,’ he said weakly.

Then his eye rolled upwards and the thin breaths stopped.

Bjorn stared at him, baffled. Only slowly did he register that the chamber around him was silent, save for the growl and crackle of the power-spire operating at full pitch. The fight was over.

Godsmote strode over to him, limping badly. His bolt pistol had been discarded and his chainsword was plasma-scorched.

‘I don’t like the way they fight,’ he rasped through damaged augmitters.

Bjorn said nothing. He clambered to his feet.

Godsmote looked down at the battered corpse on the floor. ‘Are you sure you need two hands?’ he asked, knocking his helm to try to get his vox-filters working properly again.

‘For the Emperor,’ murmured Bjorn. ‘Was that a joke?’

His comm-link activated. ‘If you’ve finished,’ came the shipmaster’s voice, ‘you may want to get back up here.’

‘Status,’ ordered Bjorn, starting to walk.

‘The fleet’s falling back,’ said the shipmaster. ‘Taking heavy fire on all fronts. They have more guns than us.’ He paused then, as if unwilling to go on. ‘And the *Hrafnkel*. I think they’ve crippled it.’

Bjorn started moving faster. ‘Do *not* fall back,’ he ordered. Russ had been on the flagship. ‘Hold course until I get there.’

A sigh came over the vox, as if the shipmaster had predicted such a command. ‘And what course would that be, lord?’

‘Direct for the *Hrafnkel*,’ Bjorn growled. ‘If it goes down, we go down with it.’

SIX

Resentments
Breaking in
The Crimson King

Above the serenely cleansed orb of Chondax, the darkness of space was beginning to fracture. One warship after another burned in close from the jump-points, gliding to a halt in high orbit above the White World, each one as immaculate as the planet below.

At the centre of the gathering hung the *Swordstorm*, as ornate as the old palaces of the Khitan emperors. Its hull bulged with the modified engine-coils that made it just about the fastest thing in the Imperium's many battlefleets. Like all White Scars vessels it was kept in spotless condition, scoured and cleansed by armies of crawler-cherubs until it glowed in the velvet void like a jewel.

Beyond its escort perimeter waited other cruisers – the *Tchin-Zar*, the *Lance of Heaven*, the *Qo-Fian*, each one attended by a flock of smaller craft. Other V Legion task forces were spread across the galaxy in scattered bands, but only here on Chondax was the core strength of the Legion mustered, and it was a formidable sight.

Trying to get her head around the rapidly coalescing formations, Ilya hurried down the spinal corridor of the *Swordstorm*, heading from the main operations chamber toward the command bridge and strategium. Halji strode effortlessly beside her, matching her frantic pace with easy, languid strides.

'Do we have word of the *Uzan*?' she barked into her vox-bead. 'What about the *Kaljian*?'

Responses came back in delayed bursts. Her liaison officers were getting much better, but they still found it difficult keeping account of the straggling set of Legion assets.

'Kaljian *is incoming*,' came an answer at last. '*Nothing yet from the* Uzan, *or the* Hawkstar. *We will keep trying*.'

Ilya spat out an old Terran curse, and Halji chuckled.

'You have done well,' he said approvingly. 'I think Khagan will be pleased.'

'He is never pleased,' muttered Ilya. 'Everything has to be faster, faster, faster. That's all he thinks is important, but there's more to deployment than speed.'

'There is?' asked Halji, looking interested.

'Any more information on what this is all about?' asked Ilya. 'I could really use it.'

Halji's dark face was apologetic. 'You know as much as I do, szu. Some treachery has been enacted. I heard talk of Wolves of Fenris, which, if I am honest, would not surprise me.'

Ilya stopped walking for a minute. She was feeling a bit light-headed – the past few hours had been a non-stop flurry of orders and counter-orders with no respite. Ahead of her she could hear rapid footfalls as ship crew hurried to their stations.

'Just what is it with you and the Wolves?' she asked. 'Every time they're mentioned you go quiet.'

Halji gave her a wary look.

'Seriously,' said Ilya.

'For me? There is no issue,' said Halji, nonchalantly. 'Their reputation goes before them.'

'There's more to it.'

Halji paused. 'I am not sure it is easy to explain in way you will understand.'

'Try me,' said Ilya testily. 'I've lived with you all for long enough.'

‘All Legions have reputations,’ Halji said, awkwardly. ‘Some… overlap. The Wolves boast of it. We have difficulties in past because of it. Others assume that we were the same. They see ritual marks, the scars, and make judgement.’ Halji winced as he spoke, as though he were ashamed of it all. ‘We are not savages. We do not wish to be seen as savages.’

Ilya laughed. ‘You’re… *jealous?*’

Halji looked stung. ‘That is not what I said.’

‘It was what you meant,’ smiled Ilya, shaking her head in amusement. The Scars were still capable of surprising her. ‘I would never have thought it – the Emperor’s perfect killing machines, and you’re still capable of envy.’

Halji turned away from her and started walking again, looking irritated. ‘I told you, hard to explain.’

‘You explained perfectly,’ said Ilya, trotting to keep up with him. ‘But what worries me is what happens next. If they’ve committed some crime, what are you going to do? Go after them? You’re right about one thing – they’ve got a reputation.’

Halji halted then and turned on her. His expression became uncharacteristically dark, like the sun filtering behind a cloudbank. ‘Listen to me,’ he said firmly. ‘We may not be “executioners” or “world eaters” or “the perfect”, but we are what we are. We have never demanded respect from anyone, and if they know nothing of us then that is their loss, because we know about them. We are faster – we move faster, kill faster. They are brothers, but if Russ has committed crime then the Khagan will swat him aside like ragged dog he is. Have you ever seen our primarch fight? *That* is perfection.’

Ilya stared back at him, startled. Halji almost never raised his voice, but now it shook with fervour.

They resent it so much, this disregard, she thought, *and yet they will not change. But then, why should they?*

She bowed in apology. ‘I was not speaking seriously, Halji. I have offended you. I’m sorry.’

Halji shook his dark-skinned head dismissively. ‘The fault is mine. I should not be troubled by it.’

Ilya looked up at him thoughtfully. The sigils and devices that had once seemed so alien to her – tribal marks, jagged-edged brotherhood kill tallies – were now a part of her own life. If she stayed with the Legion much longer then she might even come to understand their mindset. A bit longer still, and she would start to share their resentments.

‘So will it come to that?’ she asked, seriously this time. ‘Will the Khan take on the Wolf?’

Halji started walking again. ‘Loyalty matters,’ he said flatly. ‘If Warmaster orders it, how could he not?’

The *Hrafnkel* wallowed in a torrent of incoming fire, slewing amidst a silent cloud of las-beams and torpedo trails. The mighty guns still returned volleys, lighting up its gunmetal flanks in flashes of sudden brilliance. The corpses of a dozen vessels circled it like moons around a planet, their shells hollowed out by the vast explosions that had ended them.

The flagship was pulling back towards the beleaguered core of the Space Wolves fleet now, its escorts gone and its shields flickering out. A typically rash plunge into the heart of the battle-sphere had brutalised its magnificent outline, despite the carnage it had caused on the way in.

It was isolated, out of position, exposed. Those Alpha Legion warships that had withstood its initial charge were now returning fire in organised volleys, staying at long range and peppering the crippled beast with lance strikes.

Bjorn watched the carnage though the realview blisters on the *Helridder*’s bridge. Every impact on the flagship’s broken hull felt like a strike at his own heart. He’d seen boarding torpedoes loosed, just as they had been against his own frigate. The Alpha Legion’s skill with those Hel-damned things was phenomenal.

‘Bring us in close, shipmaster,’ Bjorn commanded.

The *Helridder* wasn’t the only ship burning towards the crippled *Hrafnkel* – attack craft from both fleets had scented blood and were racing into position. The Alpha Legion warships came in waves, ramping up the volume of incoming fire; the Wolves vessels responded with increasing desperation, hurling their already damaged hulls into the path of the withering barrage.

‘We won’t last long in this,’ replied the shipmaster. His voice betrayed no fear, just a blunt openness to the facts.

‘That is understood. What’s the *Hrafnkel*’s status?’

‘Void shields are down, though it’s still got power and lances. We’ve tracked repeated boarding impacts.’

Bjorn looked out at the incoming ranks of Alpha Legion warships, most of which outgunned the *Helridder* by an uncomfortable margin. His ship might divert some fire from the flagship for a while, but he guessed it would be a painfully short respite.

‘They’ve landed hundreds,’ observed Godsmote, looking at the sensor readings streaming in from the flagship.

Bjorn nodded. ‘That’s the fight we need to be in.’ He licked his tongue along his fangs, feeling a faint acid-tang. ‘This seems to be the day for torpedoes. Time to show them how good our aim is.’ He turned to the master. ‘Wait until we’re away, then take the ship into the Alpha Legion firing line and do what damage you can. You know what that means?’

The shipmaster looked up at him, his grizzled Fenrisian face defiant. ‘The Hand of Russ be with you, lord.’

Bjorn bowed respectfully. ‘Until next winter.’

Godsmote, Eunwald, Angvar, Urth and Ferith were already itching to go – Bjorn could sense their kill-pheromones, as rich and animalistic as predator-musk, and they fed into his own.

‘Time to hunt,’ he said.

The torpedo chamber was far below the bridge level, surrounded by thick adamantium bulkheads and lit with red combat-lamps. Each boarding pod lay at the head of a circular launch tunnel ringed with protective rune-carvings. A larger vessel would have carried whole banks of hull-rippers or Caestus rams, their prows tipped with clusters of magna-meltas and their chassis capable of carrying an entire squad into combat, but the *Helridder* had the minimum complement for its class: ten slender tubes, each one kitted with a single melta-burst prow and reinforced impact zone. The torpedoes were less than six metres long in their launch-berths and had room for a lone power-armoured occupant.

‘Holy Hel,’ swore Godsmote, looking doubtfully at his coffin-like receptacle.

‘They’re minimally guided once launched,’ said Bjorn, clamping his axe to the front of his breastplate and lowering himself into the torpedo. ‘Try to get a lock once you’re in the flagship. If we can muster, so much the better. If we can’t, just kill everything you find.’

The pack clambered into position and shackled down their restraint cradles. Warning lights began to throb angrily and the last of the launch crew scuttled free of the chamber. Bjorn lay back in his capsule, feeling the growing vibration of the device’s thrusters.

‘Journey well,’ he said, his parting order as the coffin-door closed over him. Locking bolts slid shut with a cascade of clangs.

Bjorn heard his breathing, hot and heavy in the dark. He clenched the fingers of his hand, feeling confined.

This is how Dreadnoughts must feel, he thought. *Poor bastards.*

The thrusters behind him keyed, rising quickly to a dull roar. He heard blast-hatches slide open, followed by the rush of escaping air. The torpedo trembled like a living thing. Bjorn’s helm display,

interfacing seamlessly with the capsule's onboard systems, gave him a countdown.

Here we go.

The torpedo blasted down the tube. Bjorn slammed back against his harness, his whole body thrown up against the rear bulkhead. He had an impression of immense straight-line speed for a few seconds, then a wild change of trajectory as the torpedo swung down and towards the reeling behemoth of the *Hrafnkel*.

Gritting his teeth against the colossal pull, he studied the sensor readings tearing down the interior of his rattling helm. He saw the glowing points of the other torpedoes following him down, spiralling through burning zones of las-fire. The flagship loomed up with horrifying speed, a huge block of glowing wireframe against a black void-field.

He braced for the impact, and then it came – a burst of melta-detonation that made the torpedo shudder, followed by a massive explosion that hurled Bjorn hard against his restraints. Even in power armour and protected by the torpedo's outer shell the impact was ferocious, wrenching him forwards and nearly causing him to black out. The tube ground onwards for a few more metres, shivering as it carved its way through solid hull-casing.

A second later and the torpedo's locking bolts withdrew with a hiss. Shaking his head to clear it, Bjorn thumped the restraint cage's release mechanism. His capsule opened up, and he clambered to his feet, unlocking his axe and sweeping it around him.

Debris slewed past, caught in the howl of the rapidly depressurising ship-atmosphere. He leant against it, fighting through the maelstrom, his armour dragged at by guttering flames. The metal decking around him was twisted from the melta-impact – he had to clamber up through the wreckage before finding surer ground, all the while fighting against the roar and rush of racing oxygen. The lumens had shattered on his way in, and his helm's night-vision was a smear of movement.

Only once past the next bulkhead along was he able to seal a blast-door behind him and halt the depressurisation. He was inside the *Hrafnkel*, somewhere down in the lower decks. He activated *Blódbringer*'s disruptor field, flooding the confined space with ice-blue luminance.

'Report,' he voxed over the pack-wide comm, blink-summoning locator runes for the others.

Nothing came back: no locators, no responses. His display looked damaged – a criss-crossed maze of feedback and half-resolved target-locks. He clanged the haft of his axe against the side of his helm, jolting the signals and forcing a quartet of fresh target locks to swim across the display.

'*Skítja*,' he spat, frustrated, pressing on down the corridor and opening up another slide door.

On the far side was a supply depot, its ceiling lost in the distance and its shadowy walls soaring up on either side. Towers of transit crates reared away in every direction, locked together by hulking metal scaffolds. Chains hung down from the roof-space from inert cargo loaders, themselves suspended from the chamber's summit on heavy metal rails.

Ahead of him the darkness was broken by muzzle-flares and explosions. Throttled cries echoed down the narrow paths between the towers, swiftly cut off. He smelled the familiar odours of combat: fyceline smoke, blood, human fear.

Where is my pack?

He started to run down the canyons, cursing the junk swarming over his tactical display. He sprinted straight ahead, eventually breaking into an open space beyond the first wall of stacked crates. A lifter had been brought down ahead of him in a tangled mess of broken metal and severed chain links, bigger than a Warhound Titan even in its ruin.

For a moment Bjorn saw nothing else – no bodies, no targets. Then the tower to his right blew apart in a welter of burning plasteel. A warrior in pearl-grey armour flew across the plasteel deck plates in front of him, broken limbs rolling, skidding to a halt and leaving a long slick of blood in his wake.

Bjorn whirled around, hackles up, wondering what could cast aside a fully armoured Space Marine with such disdain.

Then the enemy stepped from the shadows, and he understood perfectly.

The Khan stood in his private meditation chamber, high up on the terraced shoulders of the *Swordstorm*. Before him rose a many-faceted crystalflex dome looking out into the void beyond. He watched his ships suspended in the blackness, lined up ready for action, every one of them poised for his command.

Many thousands of souls crewed those ships, both Space Marine and mortal. Each one alone had the potential to annihilate worlds; together, their power was almost incomprehensible.

Has this much power ever been concentrated in so few pairs of hands, he wondered? *The entire galaxy entrusted to twen– no, eighteen brothers. The peril of it is obvious.*

The Khan's proud, aquiline face lowered towards his ornate breastplate gorget.

My father knew the risks. He must have done. Why is He silent now?

He turned away from the observation dome. Artefacts lined the walls around him – ancient flintlocks, sabres, mauls and halberds. His boots sunk into a thick fur rug. Books from a thousand worlds and from the span of ten thousand years lined hardwood shelves lit up by the soft light of a real fire.

His movements were quietly powerful, like a tyger prowling back and forth in its cage. His cloak rippled all the way to his ankles, brushing against the ivory and gold of his battleplate and shrouding the scabbard of his dao blade.

Magnus, he brooded, staring into the flames. *My good friend.*

He remembered their initial encounter on Ullanor, meeting on the Triumph Plain with the last blood of the slain greenskins still stinking in the air.

'Greetings, brother,' Magnus had said, grinning across his strange ruddy face, striding down from his lander with his rouged and cartouched cabal in tow. 'You were actually fighting here, they say.'

The Khan bowed. 'In the system. Horus took the core world.'

Magnus clapped his big hand on the Khan's shoulder. 'Of course he did. How are you? You look leaner than you were, if such a thing were possible.'

The Khan gave an equivocal shrug. Magnus was a little taller than him, a little broader, with his florid scarlet mane and decked out in flamboyant ornamentation. He looked like one of the Qo Golden Emperors the Khan had killed.

'I dislike these gatherings,' the Khan said, looking out over the plain at the gathering masses. Thousands of Legion battalions had already made planetfall, and the polished-stone expanse milled with the heavy equipment of half a dozen different Legions. The air was thick with engine fumes and kicked-up dust. Above them, low in the atmosphere, hung the massive shadows of bulk landers.

'You and I both,' agreed Magnus. 'Will we have a chance to speak?'

The Khan drew closer. 'I hope so. The Angel is here – we need to confer.'

'About the Librarius.'

'You must have heard the rumours.'

Magnus smiled sadly. 'There are always rumours. Russ can shout his ignorance as much as he likes. I think the rest of the Imperium is learning to ignore him.'

'It is not just Russ.'

'Worry less,' said Magnus. 'There will always be suspicion of the gifted. We have to manage it, to explain it. Trust in enlightenment.'

'You forget, brother, I am not gifted.'

'Are you not?' asked Magnus, smiling shrewdly. 'If you say so.'

‘They will destroy what we have built. Angron, Mortarion, Russ. None of them rest easily with it. If we do not guard what we have won–’

‘You forget one thing.’

‘Which is?’

‘Our father,’ said Magnus, fondly. ‘He set this thing in motion – can you imagine him letting the attack dogs ruin it? Mortarion and Russ will be given their chance to fulminate, I have seen it. Our only task, my elusive friend, is to remain true to reason.’

The Khan looked into Magnus’s one eye, seeing the trust in it. The faith.

You are wise in so many ways, he thought grimly. *But you are a scholar, not a warrior, and you do not truly see the danger.*

‘A reckoning will come,’ the Khan warned. He turned to one side, gesturing for Yesugei to approach. ‘This is my counsellor, Targutai Yesugei, master of storm-magic in our Legion. It would be wise to nominate counterparts – an alliance between the like-minded.’

‘A cabal?’ asked Magnus.

‘A conversation,’ said the Khan.

The Crimson King regarded Yesugei for a moment. His lone eye glittered in Ullanor’s foul sunlight, as if probing deep into the unseen.

‘Mighty,’ he said at last, his voice properly respectful. ‘You would have found a place by my side, had you been born under Prosperine skies.’ He motioned for one of his entourage to join them – a tall figure wearing ruby power armour and carrying a staff of ivory.

‘Zadyin arga Targutai Yesugei,’ said Magnus, speaking the Khorchin with perfect inflection. ‘This is Ahzek Ahriman. I think you and he might get on.’

Ahriman bowed, as did Yesugei.

‘I am honoured, weather-maker,’ said Ahriman, his voice as cultured and subtle as all his kind.

‘Honour is mine,’ said Yesugei, less fluently, betraying the poor command of Gothic that plagued so many of the V Legion.

Magnus looked back at the Khan, still in good humour. ‘So there we are,’ he said. ‘Your conversation is established. Now, must we linger on this dust-clogged plain all morning, or does the Imperium’s munificence here extend to something to eat?’

The Khan remembered how Magnus had behaved then – the smiles a little forced, the bonhomie a little relentless. Magnus had been worried about something on Ullanor and his attempts to disregard it were not successful. He was no dissembler: the truth shone from him like light from a star, pure and naïve.

Ullanor was the last time they had spoken. It was strange – too strange – to think of that massive soul lying under the crude, hacking blades of the Space Wolves. The Crimson King had been so consummately powerful, so steeped in the rich arts of heaven, the very stuff of the veil; if he had truly fallen, then the galaxy had become a warped and confusing place.

‘Khagan,’ came a voice from the open doorway.

The Khan turned to see Qin Xa standing before him. The keshig master was already in battle-armour, a hulking suit of blast-scorched Terminator plate covered in the trophies of his unmatched combat record.

‘I need more,’ the Khan told him. ‘More information. I will not attack my brother without confirmation.’

Qin Xa bowed. ‘The star-speakers receive more visions.’

‘Do they confirm it?’

‘Some do.’ The master spoke haltingly. ‘Others do not. We have contradictory interpretations.’

‘Explain.’

‘Some tell us what we already know – Leman Russ has turned rebel, driven by hatred of Magnus. The Warmaster orders us to bring him to judgement. The Twentieth Legion may already have engaged them.’

‘Alpharius’s snakes,’ said the Khan contemptuously.

‘But we have other reports,’ said Qin Xa. ‘Just listen to this: they say that the Warmaster has turned renegade and taken many Legions with him. We are commanded to return to the Throneworld and stand beside Lords Dorn and Russ to defend it.’

For that, the Khan had no words. He stared at Qin Xa, feeling the blood coursing hard in his temples.

‘Madness,’ he said weakly. Thoughts raced through his mind in quick succession, each one half-formed and pregnant with possibilities.

It had begun on Chondax, right at the end – the first inkling that all was not well. There had been no detail then, no authentication, just a stray star-speaker vision of dubious provenance. It should have been easy to dismiss, to put down to the warping power of the veil, but it hadn’t. It had worn at him, unravelling his sleep.

The Warmaster stands upon a precipice.

It had been hard to know what to make of that. Should he have recalled the Legion to find out? What did it even mean?

‘Madness,’ he said again.

‘Indeed,’ replied Qin Xa calmly. ‘Every star-speaker in the fleet is having a different dream. The zadyin arga are working to uncover the truth.’

‘The truth?’ The Khan laughed hollowly. ‘Which truth?’ He felt his hand instinctively reaching for his blade, and pulled it back. ‘I need more. Why has the darkness lifted only now?’

Qin Xa bowed in apology. ‘Every effort is being made to–’

‘Is he dead?’ demanded the Khan, frustration mastering him momentarily. ‘That is the first task. I need to know if Magnus lives. Tell them that.’

‘Nothing can be divined from Prospero. It seems likely that–’

‘Not good enough!’ roared the Khan, balling his immense fists. He felt fury welling, not the wholesome rage of the battlefield, but a choked, impotent rage of ignorance. ‘I have the strength of the Legion arrayed before me, ready to strike. The ordu is assembled, and yet none can tell me who the enemy is. Tell them if they cannot interpret correctly then I shall come up to their spires and hammer their dreams into order for them.’

Qin Xa weathered the storm, standing silently while the primarch raged. ‘It will be done.’

‘Quickly,’ insisted the Khan, giving in to the urge to grasp the hilt of his dao. ‘I give them twelve hours. We will not remain in this backwater while the galaxy burns – wherever this war is, we will find it.’

A low chime sounded from a large pedestal writing desk in the far corner of the chamber. A hololith flickered into existence over the varnished surface and the old scar-latticed face of Hasik Noyan-Khan crackled into life.

The Khan swung to face it. ‘News?’

‘*Of a kind*,’ replied Hasik, his voice wavering with static. ‘*Ships are materialising on the edge of augur-range. No response to our comms, and they appear to be deploying for attack*.’

‘The Wolves?’ asked the Khan. ‘Or more of ours?’

‘*Neither*,’ reported Hasik, his normally flat voice punctuated by uncertainty. ‘*Alpha Legion vessels*.’

Qin Xa’s eyes narrowed. The Khan almost felt like laughing. Nothing made sense. After years insulated from the rest of the galaxy, locked in a campaign that had promised little glory and much routine hard work, every certainty seemed to have been twisted into a comical level of incongruity.

Our warriors are trained by this game. They learn to see threats from all sides.

'Hold position,' ordered the Khan. 'Try to talk to them, and do not fire unless fired upon. Some witchery is at work here and I will not be dragged into it without knowing why. I will join you shortly. Until then, you know your craft.'

Hasik's hololithic head bowed and the link guttered out.

Qin Xa raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'I would offer counsel, Khagan,' he said, 'if I had any.'

The Khan clasped his gauntlets together. No patterns emerged. His tactician's mind – far more acute than Guilliman or Dorn ever had the grace to recognise – fell into its familiar run: analyse, project, counter, surprise.

'We must be light on our feet here, *keshiga*,' he murmured. 'We are like blind men fighting the sighted.'

Despite everything, he felt the first stirrings of enjoyment kindle in his soul. He looked out at the starfield beyond the chamber viewport, weighing options, balancing likelihoods. This was what he had been born for: not the running down of greenskins, but the Great Game, the clash of powers.

'Do you remember, Xa?' he said. 'You, Yesugei, Hasik and me against a whole world – a hundred empires, each with a thousand blades. It has been too long since we had a real challenge.'

Qin Xa looked unsure. 'Then who is the enemy now, Khagan?' he asked. 'That is all I need to know.'

'They are *all* the enemy,' said the Khan, striding to the doorway that would take him to the bridge. 'They always have been.'

SEVEN

Contemptor
Inscrutability
Aether tides

Bjorn spat blood as he ran, crashing into a line of empty crates and scattering them across the floor. By instinct he lurched to his right, just evading a hurricane of shells that screamed over his dipping shoulder. He reached cover, of a sort – the wreckage of the cargo lifter – and flung himself into the shadow of the mangled cockpit.

The enemy came after him, crunching through the remains of five dead Space Wolves. Its massive feet clanged dully against the deck, its huge clawed fist rotated and its steaming assault cannon clunked as another magazine was shunted into the chamber.

A Contemptor, Bjorn thought ruefully. *This was a short boarding action.*

The Dreadnought towered over him, lumbering after him with the remorseless certainty of some gigantic saurian on the prowl. Twin rear smokestacks gouted oily smoke as it stomped through the wreckage, shrouding a chassis that hummed and sputtered and hissed with mechanical activity.

In the space of a single heartbeat, crouched behind the flimsiest of protection, Bjorn assessed his options.

Decision made.

He burst back out, powering clear of the lifter debris even as the Contemptor's assault cannon opened up again, shredding through the wreckage in a storm of firepower. Sprinting up one of the lifter's half-crushed claws before it was blown away, Bjorn gained some height – just enough to see the Contemptor's glowing eyes flash back at him.

'Hjolda!' he bellowed, almost laughing at the absurdity of what he planned, then hurled himself through the air.

He sailed clear of the assault cannon's fury and collided with the Dreadnought's shoulder. Bjorn swung his crackling axe-blade, slicing deep into the casing of its armoured hood, lodging himself halfway up the torso. The Contemptor swung wildly, nearly dislodging him on the first attempt. Bjorn pulled himself higher, scrabbling clear of the whirling power claw. He landed a punch hard into the Contemptor's helm, then another, hammering at it with his half-hand. His fist's unfinished mechanics shattered quickly, but he smashed one of the slanted eye-pieces and let slip a growl of satisfaction.

The Contemptor lurched round again, wrenching *Blódbringer* loose. Bjorn was swung clear and tumbled through mid-air – he crashed to the ground three metres away, just managing to keep hold of his blade. He twisted around, only to stare right into the barrels of the assault cannon.

'*Skíthof!*' Bjorn roared defiantly, bracing himself for the shell-rain that would end him, determined to keep his eyes open.

But then a volley of mass-reactive bolts slammed into the Dreadnought from over to its left, blazing against its armour plating and dousing it in a rippling curtain of mini-explosions. The Contemptor's assault cannon barrels slewed to one side, knocked clear by the barrage and unloading less than a metre from where Bjorn lay.

'*Fenrys!*' came Godsmote's frenzied war-cry. '*Fenrys faerir mord!*'

Three of his pack had made it, charging towards the Contemptor and loosing a hail of kicking bolter-fire. Bjorn leapt to his feet, scrambling out of the path of the still-firing assault cannon and

flinging his axe at the Dreadnought's damaged head. The blade scythed towards the target, but the Contemptor angled away. *Blódbringer* lodged fast on its upper carapace, spitting harmlessly.

Bjorn drew his bolt pistol and fired with the others, darting from one crumpled mass of cover to the next as the hangar rang with the hard bang of bolter-rounds. All four of them emptied their weapons at the target, swamping it in a blaze of detonations.

It kept coming. They damaged it, but it kept coming, wading through the firestorm just as it had been designed to do. The assault cannon swung round in a ruinous arc, smashing clear what remained of their scant cover. One of the Wolves – Eunwald, Bjorn thought – was too slow leaping clear and was knocked onto his back by the impact. Godsmote was bludgeoned aside almost as an afterthought, his armour split down the breastplate.

They couldn't bring it down. They couldn't get close enough, and they didn't have the weapons to hurt it at range.

'Allfather!' Bjorn roared, charging in close again, hoping against hope to somehow get a zero-range shot into its more vulnerable cabling before the Hel-damned thing's claw ripped him away.

He never got the chance. None of them did.

The gale came from nowhere, as if the chamber-wall had been punched out to the void. The force of it knocked him sideways, flooring him once more. His vision reeled and his helm cracked hard against the deck. He heard what sounded like thunder breaking, followed by the actinic crackle of energy weapons igniting.

With a lurch of recognition, he realised the rush was not that of decompression, nor was it natural – the winds that howled across the chamber had the ice-rimed redolence of Asaheim.

Bjorn lifted his head, groggy from the impact, to see the Contemptor facing a new foe. Despite everything, he couldn't resist a crooked grin at that.

The game was over. The Wolf King had arrived.

Shiban brought the *Kaljian* up into one-third speed, keeping a close eye on the tactical scanners clustered around his command throne. The bridge crew worked at their stations while Jochi, Chel and the others of his legionary command retinue stood in a loose semicircle close by.

'Keep this heading,' he ordered. 'Do not exceed this speed.'

The *Kaljian* had only just arrived at the muster, one of the last to respond to the summons, before being ordered right back out on fleet perimeter patrol as part of Hasik Noyan-Khan's response to the Alpha Legion approach.

Orders from the centre had been clipped. Shiban guessed that was because they had no idea what was going on – he certainly didn't.

'They'll be in visual range soon,' observed Jochi.

Shiban could hear the doubt in his voice. The Alpha Legion were an unknown quantity. They hadn't responded to communication requests and had just hung back on the edge of the system, quietly accumulating more warships across a wide sweep of local space.

'Maintain the line, master,' warned Shiban, noting a minor deviation in their trim respective to the vessels on either side of them. The White Scars response had been almost painfully proportionate – a thin line of attack-craft spread out within a lance-strike's range of one another. The bigger warships of both fleets remained at the rear, brooding on the edge of detection.

Everything had changed so quickly, garbled in a flurry of contradictory astropathy and secure comm-bursts: Russ of the Wolves had gone rogue; or the Warmaster had; the White Scars were ordered to reinforce the Alpha Legion at Alaxxes; they were commanded to return to Terra; Ferrus Manus had killed the peacock Fulgrim; Mars was in open revolt. Some of the warp-translated messages bore chrono-marks from months previously; some had been sent, it seemed, only hours

ago.

Shiban had reported his findings from Phemus immediately upon entering communications range of Chondax, but he had no doubt that they had sunk into the morass of briefings without trace.

'Why do they vox nothing?' asked Jochi. He'd complained of the same thing three times already, vocalising what the entire crew was feeling.

Shiban smiled wearily. 'This is the Alpha Legion, brother. Their gift is to be irritatingly obtuse.'

Ahead of them, a thin line of glowing dots became visible through the real-view ports. At first they seemed like little more than a few extra stars. Then they became steadily brighter.

A pinprick glimmered on his retinal display, indicating that Hasik's orders had been updated. Shiban blinked to activate them.

No response from XX Legion command. Attempts to make contact continue. First wave of ships incoming on planar trajectory. Do not escalate situation. Do not fire unless fired upon. Maintain perimeter integrity. Do not permit incoming craft to penetrate within range of core fleet. Stand by for further instruction.

Shiban drew in a deep breath. Those orders had altogether too much of a whiff of contradiction to be entirely helpful.

'We are being targeted,' came a report from one of the bridge's sensorium crew.

'Pinpoint the source,' Shiban replied. 'Gain a lock and prepare main lance. Do not fire until I give the command.'

The *Kaljian* crept forwards, moving far slower than he generally liked to power it. Everything about the frigate had been designed for sudden, violent movements in the heat of battle; nudging along at such meagre velocities exposed the rough edges of the engine design.

'We were told the Alpha Legion had engaged the Wolves,' said Chel thoughtfully. 'Or was that just another scry-glitch?'

Shiban couldn't give him an answer. Either the XX Legion had a suspiciously large number of operational warships, or something had gone awry with a star-speaker's auguries. Both were possible.

He felt tense. This was not the sort of encounter he enjoyed: a cagey, stepwise testing of boundaries.

'What do they *want*?' asked Jochi again, watching warily as the closest Alpha Legion vessels drew even closer.

'It does no good to speculate,' said Shiban. 'They desire to keep us guessing, so I suggest we do not indulge them.'

The lead Alpha Legion vessel emerged from the void, advancing as part of a line of warships in the mirror-image of the White Scars own deployment.

Just like us, thought Shiban. Everything was similar – the ships, the weapons, their configurations. The Alpha Legion had sent lesser craft ahead, leaving the behemoths clustered at the rear. The symmetry of the advance was eerie.

'Energy spikes?' Shiban enquired, scrutinising its growing profile.

'Nothing, khan,' replied the sensorium operator.

By then Shiban could make out details of the vessel's hull on the magnocular viewers. It was blue, a deep, indigo blue, and marked with the chained Alpha device of the XX Legion. Marker lights flickered along its serrated flanks, blurry behind the interference of active void shields.

It came forward steadily, neither hurrying nor dawdling. Something about the brazenness of its approach was annoying – the whole Alpha Legion presence smacked of arrogance, of a knowing superiority.

They understand what has happened while we have been absent. Of course they are arrogant.

'Any break in their formation?' Shiban asked.

‘No, khan.’

‘Any break in ours?’

‘None.’

He felt his fingers itch to drum along the armrest of the command throne. Every warrior instinct screamed at him to *act*, to seize the initiative, to transform the uncertainty into something he could take control of.

‘It has stopped, khan.’

Shiban glanced down at his throne’s tactical hololith projection. The line of Alpha Legion warships had come to a standstill, strung out in a vast holding pattern.

‘Full halt,’ he ordered.

All across the White Scars fleet, the other advance vessels did the same. The two fleet vanguards hung in the void, both immobile, a wall of ivory and gold staring at a barrier of blue and copper.

Silence descended across the bridge, broken only by the movement of fingers over consoles and the *click-click-click* of servitor motors working.

‘So what now?’ asked Jochi, staring gloomily at the forward viewers.

Shiban pressed his fingers together, bridging them in front of his face, his elbows resting on the command throne.

‘We see who blinks first,’ he said.

Leman Russ slammed into the Contemptor, roaring a war-cry that made the distant ceiling tremble. He carried the frostblade *Mjalnar* two-handed, its toothed length spitting and shimmering with barely constrained energies. His ruddy, helmless face blazed with the fury of the god-marked, and his blond hair flailed around him like a corona of winter sunlight.

Bjorn caught the look in those sky-blue eyes, just for a second, and felt even his war-seasoned hearts misgive him. The Wolf King in combat was like an avalanche crashing down a mountainside. The aura of murder he projected was incredible; the air hummed with it, a wall of soul-shock that crashed like a bow wave across everything in his path.

The Contemptor swung around to meet the threat and was blown away. Russ charged through assault cannon shells in a hail of armour-deflected impacts. He smashed hard into the Dreadnought, hacking wildly. *Mjalnar* took out the cannon in a single swipe, severing the multiple barrels and sending them clattering.

Rocked, the Contemptor lashed out with its claw, aiming for the primarch’s throat. Russ evaded the choke-hold and crunched his elbow into the Dreadnought’s helm. Then the blade jammed down again, clanging from the Contemptor’s ravaged carapace. The war machine staggered away and Russ surged after it, his blade sweeping in haymaking arcs that cleaved through ceramite and smashed armourglass.

It was not artful, it was not elegant – every blow was brutal with primal potency, and the end came quickly. Russ hewed down, smashing open the Contemptor’s torso below where Bjorn’s axe-blade was still lodged. Its shell cracked open with a wet *schlick*, exposing bubbling amniotic tanks within. Russ piled in, switching to a one-hand grip so that his gauntlet was free to seize the enclosed flesh.

The final scream was sickening – a thin, barely audible shriek of agony from the sliver of once-warrior that still endured within the Contemptor’s innards. Russ wrenched the meat-chunk free, dragging a tangle of feeder-tubes and neural bundles with it. Fluids – blood, tank nutrients and engine lubricants – splattered across his gold-rimmed armour.

For a second, Russ held the Contemptor’s mortal elements before him. The creature was meagre and dripping, a sordid collection of barely viable organs. Something like a lung trembled wetly on strands of sinew; a lone eye stared out from a pulped cranial mass.

Russ drew the remnant closer to him. ‘You should have stayed dead.’

Then he twisted his fist closed, throttling the last life from the Contemptor’s erstwhile occupant and casting the corpse-matter to the floor with a damp, gory slap.

Only then did Bjorn notice other souls: Lord Gunn was there, as were more than fifty warriors of Onn. The noise of bolter-fire echoed across the cavernous chamber as more infiltrators were hunted down.

‘You,’ said Russ, looking at Bjorn accusingly. ‘What are you doing on my ship?’

Bjorn clambered to his feet, feeling awkward and superfluous. ‘The shields were down. We thought–’

‘I know they were down,’ said Russ disdainfully. ‘I brought them down.’ The Wolf King’s face was rigid with outrage. ‘I thought he might meet me, face to face. I thought I might get a reason. Not his way, it seems.’ He spat on the floor in the direction of the downed Contemptor. ‘Just this filth, and they give us no answers before they die.’

Bjorn stared at the Dreadnought cadaver. He remembered the final words of the Alpha Legionnaire he had killed on the *Helridder*.

For the Emperor.

‘Then... are the voids operational?’ Bjorn asked. ‘Is the ship secure?’

Russ stalked over to the Contemptor’s empty chassis and yanked Bjorn’s axe free. ‘It’s always been secure. Think I’d risk the *Hrafnkel* just to blood Alpharius?’ He paused. ‘Actually, I might. But I didn’t.’

Russ threw the axe back at Bjorn, who caught it with his right hand.

‘We’re pulling back,’ Russ announced, glancing over at Gunn. ‘Clear the rest of the filth from the lower levels, then report to me on the bridge.’

Bjorn saw, with a lurch of humiliation, that he had never been needed. The whole episode had been pointless. He thought about the *Helridder*, and how in Hel they were going to get back to it – if it even still flew.

‘But *you*,’ said Russ, turning back to him with a thunderous look on his bloodied face. ‘You can come with me.’

The sky was too dark, as if the stars had been snuffed out by some gigantic hand. The earth was bone-hard, as black as onyx, crystalline and glinting dully in the light of a single moon. Dust drifted across the landscape, pooling for a moment then stirring again.

The Khan fought something – hard to make out what it was, the view was blocked by his swirling cloak. He moved fast, so fast, faster than Yesugei had ever seen him move before. The dao blade darted out, catching what little light remained and spilling out across that strange, black land.

Yesugei caught his breath. Watching the Khan fight was like watching pure energy, like the forks of heaven-lightning that formed his emblem. The clouds above parted, revealing nothing but empty void. Dust kicked up from the Khan’s boots, hanging in the air before puffing away into nothingness.

This is the land of the dead, *Yesugei thought.* Has he died? Surely I would know.

Jaghatai was a lone shard of light in the infinite darkness. Defiant. Beautiful.

You told me you had no gift. I did not believe you then, and do not now. This is not the fighting of a mortal creature.

The Khan pressed his attack, wielding his blade in both hands, his movements blurred by speed and precision. It was impossible to follow the pattern of the dao – the point flickered on the edge of sight.

Why are you here? Why are you in this place?

The thing he fought was massive, a shroud of null-light that seemed to suck vitality into its maw. Something about it was eternal, measureless and immortal.

Death. Do primarchs die? What kills them?

The Khan fought on. He was alone. The empty world stretched away from him, its horizons empty, its skies empty. Even the wind was listless, the last gasps of a million extinguished souls.

When the Khan fell, Yesugei woke.

The Stormseer jerked out of his sleep. The single blanket of his cell's bunk was soaked in sweat. For a moment he remained locked in the memory, transfixed by the vision of the primarch slumping to his knees, lost amidst the black land. Defeated.

His breathing was ragged, and he could feel both his hearts hammering. He opened his palms and saw the glossy sheen upon them, cooling fast in the chamber's chill.

'Lumen,' he croaked, and the light in the chamber rose. On the far side of the room was a metal washstand enclosing a basin and a steel cup. He got up shakily and padded over to it, running water and splashing it over his face. Then he drank, draining the cup twice. Its contents tasted like water always tasted on void-craft – thin, briny, sterile.

Yesugei looked at himself in the mirror above the washstand. He saw his face, creased with age, criss-crossed with tattoos and clan-marks, his bald pate raw from where the crystalline hood jutted against the skin.

He thought he looked pale. His skin was bleached by the harsh light, casting deep shadows under his eyes.

I look like a monster.

He rubbed his face with his hands and stood up straight. The chamber hummed with the low grind of warp engines. The *Sickle Moon* was deep into the aether and the going had not been easy. The chronometers had whirled frantically ever since breaking the veil, warning them that the jump would be a wild one.

Yesugei leaned against the wall, feeling the vibrations of the metal against his sweaty skin. The whole ship groaned and creaked as though buffeted by physical winds, though he knew that they were worlds away from anything physical.

He remembered talking to Ahriman about it when the two of them had been on Nikaea together. Even that hellish place of volcanoes and heat-shimmered air was preferable to the raw flux of the warp.

'You say there is nothing bad in… what you call it? Great Ocean?' he had asked, hesitant in his broken Gothic.

Ahriman had smiled softly. The Chief Librarian's power was obvious in every gesture. Like so many of Magnus's protégés, he was suffused with it, stuffed full of it, saturated and soaked in it. The Thousand Sons tried to be modest, but deep down they knew perfectly well that they were the most gifted. It lent them an indefinable air of understated superiority and it was that, more than anything else, that made the others hate them.

'There is plenty bad in it,' Ahriman had replied, 'just as there is in the world of the senses. But in its wholeness? No, I do not think so.'

'Have you ever travelled with Navigator?' Yesugei had asked him. 'Seen things they do?'

'Of course.'

'And you not see the faces?'

'The faces?'

Yesugei had struggled for the words. 'Screaming. Clawing at ship.'

Ahriman had laughed then – not in mockery, just in amusement. It was the quick, warm laugh of an intelligent mind, one used to taking delight in the world around it and finding nothing to fear. 'I think perhaps you were dreaming. Void travel does make one dream.'

Void travel does make one dream.

Yesugei rubbed his eyes. He'd not had an unbroken cycle's sleep since leaving Chogoris, and though he coped with the lack well enough it made his mind feel dull and cloudy. Every snatched hour or so had been plagued with nightmares. Lately he'd had the same one, over and over: the Khan in the land of the dead, duelling with some vast creature of null-light, alone under a starless sky.

The dreams of the gifted were never random, but Yesugei was too old to be fooled into thinking that they were ever literal. If he was being told something, then interpretation – the *proper* interpretation – was everything.

Still, it was hard to see the primarch driven to his knees.

He activated his vox-bead. 'Commander, the ship feels unsettled. Is all well?'

Lushan's voice, when it came, had a barely perceptible undercurrent of tension. 'The Navigator has been having… difficulties.'

'Warp storms?'

'That, he tells me, fails to capture it.'

Yesugei reached for his robes. 'I will be with you shortly.'

Yesugei went quickly up the corridors and gantries towards the bridge. As he went, his mind failed to clear. The ship's atmosphere felt muggy and close, as if a huge, humid thunderstorm were on the cusp of breaking around them. All around him, crew members went about their business, bowing as he passed them. They looked as haggard as he, worn out by the business of piloting a ship through the turmoil.

Yesugei had never accepted Ahriman's theory of the benign aether. The White Scars treated it warily, dipping into the shallows to extract the powers they employed over the elements, never probing deeper. Such was the cautious heritage of Chogoris, the legacy of the old seers of storms who had birthed their powers in the Ulaav mountains. The zadyin arga had always treated with the powers of heaven, but they had never trusted them.

Yesugei knew that other Librarius brotherhoods thought the Stormseers dull and unimaginative for that. Yesugei didn't mind the slights; he knew what benefits their limitation brought. Despite Ahriman's gentle taunting, he also knew that he had not been dreaming when he had seen those screaming faces and clawing fingers.

The warp was not benign. It never had been. That was why the Librarius had been created: not to extend the Legiones Astartes' control of warp powers, but to limit them.

Nikaea. Such a disaster.

Yesugei reached the bridge, and a pair of metre-thick blast doors slid open to welcome him.

The scene beyond the doors was a picture of controlled anxiety. Crew members in white tabards hunched over display screens, their fingers dancing across consoles. Massive iron shutters covered the real-view ports, shuddering. The whole bridge – an amphitheatre crowned with a bronze-edged dome and centred on Lushan's control throne – filled with the creak and snap of alloys under stress. Several cogitator stations had blown and were crawling with worm-like flickers of electrostatic.

'Things are bad, then,' said Yesugei, spotting Lushan standing amid a worried-looking huddle of drive technicians.

The armour-clad ship commander smiled grimly. 'If you had not made contact I would have been forced to wake you. The Geller fields are losing strength.'

'That is indeed bad. What can you do?'

'The Navigator says we should drop out of the warp. He is very insistent.'

Yesugei pursed his lips. Above him, suspended from copper-lined chains, hung a large status screen. Most of its indicators were already red; another flickered critical while he looked at it.

'Where are we?' Yesugei asked.

‘I asked him a few hours ago,’ said Lushan. ‘He started shouting. I do not think he knows.’

Yesugei nodded. ‘We knew this would be difficult. So, let us take the Navigator’s advice – it sounds as if he could use the rest.’

‘As you command.’ Lushan looked hesitant. ‘I was trying to get a fix on our position before committing to real space.’

As he spoke, a deep resounding *clang* sounded from the decks below. The whole structure listed, as if bouncing from something vast and unmoving beyond its outer limits.

Yesugei looked up at the warp shutters. It would be a trivial matter to peer beyond them, to stare into the seething non-matter that boiled beyond. He was tempted to, just to see the ferment that made their progress so painful – the entire galaxy gripped by warp fissures in a way that couldn’t be natural.

‘If we remain in this, the ship will be torn apart,’ Yesugei said. ‘Trust him – the Navigator sees what we do not.’

Lushan bowed, and moved to bring the *Sickle Moon*’s sub-warp engines online. As he turned away, Yesugei suddenly felt a prickliness ripple across him, a cold shudder playing over his skin.

‘How is our combat readiness?’ he asked.

Lushan looked surprised at that, and a little affronted. ‘We are fully prepared.’

‘Good. Place the ship on alert before we break the veil. I will need my armour.’

‘Have you sensed something?’

Yesugei’s gaze remained fixed upon the shutters. They were clattering like ger-fabric in a plains-gale, warning of the growing turmoil outside their fragile protective skin.

Do primarchs die? What kills them?

‘Standard procedure, commander,’ he said, moving to send commands to the armoury servitors. ‘Ensure all the crew do likewise.’

EIGHT

Back to dust
Sons of Horus
The hawk's cage

It was hard to maintain a sense of self-importance on the bridge of the *Hrafnkel*. Surrounded by Gunn, the High Rune Priests and the heart of the Legion command, Bjorn kept his mouth shut and his eyes down.

There had been more fighting before they'd made their way back. Alpha Legionnaire operatives had been landed in numbers throughout the lower decks, some decked out in their own colours, others in passable replicas of Fenrisian livery. That hadn't helped them: the *Vlka Fenryka* could smell their own.

Damage had been done, sometimes severely, but the entire ship had been placed on alert prior to the temporary drop in shields and so it was contained. Perhaps Alpharius had known that all along and the boarding parties had been just yet another feint. He could hardly have riled Russ more by doing so – the Wolf King raged and cursed all the way back up to the command levels, ripping apart any enemy troops in his path with brutal excess.

'Angron faced me!' he had raged, flinging the broken bodies of the legionaries away. 'Magnus faced me! What was it? Why would *he* not come?'

The anger had been real – the kind of anger that had been building for weeks in the aftermath of Prospero – but for all that, Bjorn detected a false note to it, just an echo of something that did not quite ring true.

Did you really expect him to teleport over? Would you have done it, in his position?

In any case, the *Hrafnkel* had eventually been secured, its shields restored, and Russ's retinue returned to the cavernous bridge. Once the primarch was back in full possession of the tactical situation, his mood did not improve.

The Alpha Legion maintained the superiority they had enjoyed from the start of the encounter. Their ships had gone into battle undamaged, fully equipped and more numerous. The Wolves had blunted their advance with a typically ebullient counter-charge, but the momentum was now failing. Dozens of warships had been destroyed; even the biggest were taking heavy damage. Slowly, like a pair of hands creeping around an exposed neck, their sphere of command was shrinking.

Bjorn kept out of the primarch's eye-line, slinking into the shadowy margins of the bridge space. Though he tried to block it out, he could not help but overhear the incoming glut of droning servitor reports on the priority comm.

'Losing void shields… Losing void shields… Adopting ramming course and speed… Engines overloaded… *Jarnkel* is gone… *Jarnkel* is gone… All ships in zone *tra-fyf* pull back to contingency… Incoming swarm on *Heimdl*… Losing hull integrity… Losing hull integrity… Core breach detected… *Heimdl* is gone…'

No amount of voidwar genius would reverse the losses now. A desperate gambit had been attempted, and it had failed.

They all waited.

For a long time, despite more voxed reports of damage and destruction, Russ said nothing. Every time a *vessel destroyed* notice flickered up on the viewscreens, he winced. The gesture was unfeigned:

this primarch cared about his Legion as much as any other, perhaps more so. Bjorn thought that Russ looked strangely old then, as though the years had suddenly piled deadening weight upon his brawler's shoulders.

'That's enough,' Russ growled at last. 'We'll get torn to pieces if we stay in this.' He drew in a long sigh, flexing his gauntlets with frustration, as if they alone could turn the tide. 'Beat for the nebula, rendezvous with the reserves and withdraw to the deeps. The dust will at least blunt their sensors.'

Gunn nodded. 'It'll be hard to pull clear of this.'

'We'll be the rearguard,' said Russ flatly. 'The flagship goes last, no matter how much it hurts us.' His eyes flickered towards the duty communications officer, a grey-robed kaerl hovering at the rear of the command retinue. 'Ensure that Terra gets this message. Sixth Legion engaged Twentieth Legion at Alaxxes. Taken heavy damage, retreated to cover of inner nebula. Will attempt to regroup and hold them there. Calls for reinforcement go unanswered as of chrono-mark one-zero-eight, zero-zero-seven. Will maintain engagement until further orders received.'

The officer took in the information with a blank stare, committing it to memory for transmission to the choirs.

'Why are we facing them alone?' Gunn asked irritably.

'The warp has been turbulent, lord,' replied the comms officer. 'In truth I do not know if anything we have sent has been heard. But we will keep sending it, hoping for something.'

'Chondax,' murmured Russ.

All eyes turned to the primarch.

'We cannot be far from the Fifth Legion campaign,' Russ went on, his eyes narrowing with sudden revelation. 'Why have our messages not reached the Khan?'

The officer gave him an equivocal look. 'The storms have been… unnaturally acute in that region. I doubt that anything has penetrated.'

'Keep trying,' urged Russ. 'Concentrate your efforts there.' He looked at Gunn. 'A strange one, Jaghatai, but I've never seen a sword handled better. He hasn't fallen. He can't have done. Why did I forget him?'

Bjorn watched the doubtful expressions on the others' faces. He didn't blame them; the White Scars, of all the possible Legions, were the least likely to inspire confidence. He had never seen them fight, and he knew no one who had. By reputation they were almost as mystic as the Thousand Sons, in thrall to their arcane caste of Stormseers and beholden to no one but themselves.

The officer bowed. 'If they can be reached, they will be.'

'And if we're dependent on them,' muttered Gunn, 'then we're truly neck-deep in it.'

Russ shot him a warning glance. 'He is my brother, Gunnar. Watch what you say.'

They were all your brothers, thought Bjorn. *And look how that turned out.*

The deck trembled – the *Hrafnkel* taking another heavy pounding along its prow. That ended the conversation; the Lords of the Wolves moved off, ready to begin the retreat that would take from them open space and back into the rusty embrace of the Alaxxes shoals.

'Go warily!' Russ called out after them, half in jest, but mostly in earnest. 'We will live to skin them yet.'

Soon Bjorn was alone with the primarch on the bridge's lowest tier – alone, that was, except for the two colossal wolves that prowled at his feet.

'Did you want me, lord?' he asked cautiously, watching the yellow eyes of the nearest beast as it regarded him steadily.

Russ stirred out of his thoughts, seemingly having forgotten that Bjorn was there.

'Of course I do,' he said.

The primarch turned to look up at the massive armourglass viewports, each of them a picture of

fire-streaked turmoil. The *Hrafnkel* was just one island amidst hundreds, each aflame, each moving to a deadly dance of thrust and counter-thrust.

'Much work to do,' he said, his voice deep, almost mournful. 'Watch and learn, One-Hand. This is how a primarch faces defeat.'

The *Sickle Moon* shuddered for a final time, as if relieved to be dropped out of the warp gales and easing back into real space. Its fractured Geller fields rippled clear of the outer hull, skittering with half-doused energies as the barrier fell. A second later the sub-warp drives kicked into life, their mechanical hammering replacing the dull, massive throb of the warp engines.

Yesugei rolled his shoulders as the last plate of his power armour was drilled into place. Its weight reassured him, as did the familiar hum of its servos and the oily aroma rising from the freshly serviced joints.

He held his skull-topped staff loosely in one hand. His crystalline hood fizzed a little as the implants took, sending a frisson of static across his bare scalp.

The crew, even those of the Legion, struggled not to sneak glances in his direction. Yesugei smiled a little at that, knowing how strange and magnificent a Stormseer looked when fully arrayed in the battleplate of his order.

These fanciful costumes we wear.

'Warp shutters up,' ordered Lushan, seated in the command throne. 'Bring us to quarter speed. I need location readings as soon as possible.'

The iron barriers swept open with a series of loud slams, exposing the void once more. A few stray straggles of warp essence ran down metres-thick armourglass panes, glowing and multi-hued, before gusting away to nothing.

'So where are we, commander?' Yesugei asked quietly, staring up at newly-exposed stars. He couldn't shake the skin-prickle sense of foreboding that had dogged him since waking.

Lushan, wearing his helm like the rest of the Legion contingent, didn't reply immediately. 'I think…' he began, then trailed off as more readings came in. 'Is that a ship?'

'Confirmed, commander,' replied Ergil, his sensorium officer. 'Destroyer, Sixteenth Legion profile, though with unknown markings.'

Yesugei blink-clicked a link from the *Sickle Moon*'s tactical cogitators to his helm. 'That is attack speed, commander.'

'I noticed,' said Lushan. 'And its void shields are up.'

'May I suggest we do the same?'

Lushan turned to him quizzically. 'It is a Legion vessel.'

'Do as I say.'

Lushan turned back to his throne-mounted console. 'Power all weapons, raise shields.'

'Luna Wolves warship closing to within main lance range,' reported Ergil. 'We are being targeted.'

'What in hell?' muttered Lushan. 'Pull away from it. Vox them. Ask what they think they are doing.'

The *Sickle Moon* swung round, rolling over on its axis and thrusting powerfully. The whole vessel shook as the engines ramped up to full power and kicked the ship into a sharp dive.

Yesugei watched the enemy vessel carefully as it approached. It was a brutal looking ship, blackened by scorch-marks along its prow and with las-damage mottling its flanks. It was bigger than the *Sickle Moon*, with a much larger weapons array.

'We're being voxed, commander,' announced the comm-servitor.

'Relay it,' ordered Lushan.

'*Fifth Legion warship,*' came the comm-burst. '*Declare yourself or be destroyed.*'

Lushan shook his head in disbelief. 'What are they doing?'

Yesugei's gaze remained locked on the incoming vessel. He opened his mind to the aether, just a fraction, like inching a door ajar. He felt war-lust bleeding from it – a blind, obsessive war-lust he'd never sensed before from a Legiones Astartes deployment.

And… something else.

'These are the Sons of Horus, commander,' Yesugei said. 'Best not to rile them.'

'Enemy lances priming, commander,' reported Ergil.

'*Fifth Legion warship – evasion will get you killed. You know the situation. Declare yourself.*'

'Vox them back,' replied Lushan, sounding angry now. 'Ask them what they mean. And tell them to power down their–'

Before he'd finished, the void briefly lit up. A lance-beam seared past, missing the aft-decks by less than five hundred metres. The scarred profile of the enemy warship continued to grow, racing after them on full-burn.

'They know we are faster once we reach full speed,' advised Yesugei. 'They will not let us pull away. Talk to them.'

Lushan turned on him. 'And say what?'

Another lance-burst screamed across the void between the two vessels. This time it hit, slamming directly into the *Sickle Moon*'s engines and making the void shields shriek and crackle.

The frigate bucked wildly, corkscrewing away from the impact. Banks of warning lights, already blinking red from the damage taken in the warp, went into overdrive.

'Can we get a broadside away?' demanded Lushan, rocking in his command throne as the bridge decking shook.

'That will not help,' observed Yesugei. 'They outgun us handsomely. I suggest another course of action.'

'Broadside prepared,' reported a gun-servitor flatly.

'Fire at will,' Lushan ordered it. He looked up at Yesugei. 'Believe me, if you have something to add, I will take any suggestion.'

More las-bolts and lance beams criss-crossed the void, flickering and dancing in the strange, ruinous silence of inter-ship batteries. The *Sickle Moon* took another direct hit, making the strained void shields shimmer like oil flung across water.

Yesugei's eyes narrowed beneath his sloped visor. He could sense something unusual from the vessel, something strange in the collection of psyches locked within its adamantium hull.

'This will not be solved by lances,' he said, his mind working to decipher what he had sensed.

More impacts rang out. A spar from one the bridge's upper galleries came down in a crash of broken steel struts, weakening the dome above them and sending cracks shooting out across the armourglass. A second later and the void shield over the bridge shattered in a rain of sparks. Warning klaxons blared, accompanied by the blood-glow of emergency lighting at floor level.

You are not sure about us yet, thought Yesugei, beginning to understand part of what he had felt. *You, too, are uncertain.*

'Teleport loci detected,' announced Ergil.

Lushan pushed himself to his feet, hefting his bolter. The six other White Scars stationed around the bridge did likewise.

'No, not this way, commander,' ordered Yesugei, planting his feet firmly and bracing the heel of his staff on the deck. 'We need answers – let them come.'

Lushan hesitated for a moment, weapon ready, torn between his psycho-conditioning and a direct order from a Stormseer.

'Multiple void shield failure,' came Ergil's voice again. 'They are inbound, commander.'

'As the zadyin arga commands,' voxed Lushan to his troops, his voice thick with reluctance. Then

he looked at Yesugei, as if to say, *over to you*.

Twelve ozone-bangs radiated blast shocks through the bridge atmosphere, crackling and solidifying into Space Marines in dark power armour. They swung out of their teleport zones and scattered across the deck with their weapons trained.

'Stand down!' roared a monstrous voice from a war-helm, deafening in its artificial amplification. 'Surrender the ship!'

'Do not be foolish,' replied Yesugei calmly in Gothic. 'Please, put weapons away.'

Twelve muzzles immediately locked on to him.

'*Storm-witch*!' shouted one of the boarders.

All twelve weapons opened up in that instant: a drum of bolt shells, followed up by the furnace-rush of a flamer's discharge.

Yesugei raised his staff, and the projectiles exploded in front of him in a shower of spilled force. For a brief moment he was wreathed in a wall of noise and seething fury, then it ripped away.

'This is foolish,' he said, his voice as placid, as though he were still alone on the Altak.

The twelve invaders charged toward Yesugei, leaping across railings and swerving around console stations, firing all the while.

He slammed his staff down and spears of lightning burst along its length, outshining the weapons fire and bathing the bridge in gold. He closed his free fist and the enemy's boltguns shattered. The flamer exploded with a vast, booming roar.

The bridge swelled with the roll and crack of thunder. Gathering stormwind surged over the gantries, tearing mortals from their feet and sending even the power-armoured legionaries staggering.

One of the invaders managed to get within fist-range, fighting through the swirl of gold-laced gusts. Yesugei gestured with a finger and the Space Marine – tonnes of thick ceramite, muscle and dense mechanics – hurtled away and slammed into the far wall, crunching into the bulkhead stonework.

Another fought his way close, gripping a glowing sword and bracing to swing. Yesugei gave him a tolerant look, as if indulging the enthusiasm of a child, then inclined his head by a fraction.

The sword-bearer's head snapped back. Spikes of gold lightning cracked into him, knocking the Space Marine to the deck and locking him down.

By then only one of the boarding party remained on his feet – a huge figure in ornate artificer armour carrying a crackling thunder hammer. He pushed his way through the maelstrom, leaning against the swathes of coruscation and making progress towards Yesugei by sheer force of will.

He got within three metres. Then Yesugei turned on him and opened his fist.

More lightning, as vivid and earth-breaking as the storms of Chogoris, snaked into the hammer-wielder's chest. He flew backwards, crashing through a balustrade and collapsing down into a servitor-pit with his entire body enclosed in spitting, spidery energy.

Yesugei rose into the air, gently floating upwards, buoyed by swirling aether-summoned winds. His cloak snapped and rippled around his armour, his totems and bone-tokens clattering against his breastplate. Tongues of elemental fire licked at him from the deck below.

By now the entire bridge was a picture of destruction – White Scars legionary and enemy alike cowered behind whatever cover they could find, their weapons useless.

Yesugei descended smoothly over the hammer-wielder, dipping like some mythical angel of Terran legend towards the prone figure. The howl of the wind died, shimmering away as suddenly as it had been summoned. The twelve Space Marines of the boarding party remained locked in place, tied down by glowing strands of aetheric energy.

Yesugei stood over his victim.

‘Perhaps you explain colours of your armour,’ he said.

Now that the storm had passed, things were a little clearer. The Space Marine at his feet was no son of Horus: his massive battleplate was dark green and trimmed with bronze. Sigils of fire ran around his breastplate, curling up to an artfully-designed gorget of iron and ceramite. His voice, even filtered by a gilded vox-grille, was unusually sonorous.

‘If you wish to kill me, witch,’ the Space Marine growled, ‘then do so. I shall not plead for my life.’

Yesugei frowned under his helm. The words troubled him, though not as much as the manner in which they were spoken.

‘Have no intention of killing you,’ he said. ‘If eyes do not deceive, you are Salamander. I know of no quarrel between your Legion and mine.’

A pain-tight laugh broke from the Salamander’s helm. ‘You know of… Are you serious?’

Yesugei looked out across the bridge. Nine of the aether-shackled Space Marines were Salamanders, all of them wearing heavily battle-damaged war-plate. The others looked like Iron Hands – their night-black armour and obvious augmetics gave them away.

Yesugei fell to one knee, lowering his head closer to the Salamander. The aether-webs dissipated, freeing the captives. Lushan’s White Scars edged into the open, their bolters still functional and trained on the newcomers.

‘There is much you do not know, Salamander,’ said Yesugei softly. ‘I sense it before you attack – if you are certain we are enemy, you would destroy us in the void. You risk boarding action. For some reason, you take your vessel from Warmaster’s Legion, and you try to do same to ours. Perhaps you are mad, but I sense nothing but confusion in your mind.’

Yesugei reached up to his own helm, twisting it free and locking it to his belt. The unfiltered air of the bridge tasted like ashes.

‘I am named Targutai Yesugei,’ he said. ‘That is beginning. Tell me your name, and we make progress.’

A hesitation. The big Salamander breathed noisily through his battered helm, evidently still in pain from the forces that Yesugei had unleashed upon him.

‘Xa’ven,’ he said at last. ‘Captain, Thirty-Fourth Company.’

Yesugei nodded. ‘Good. Listen, Xa’ven – everything I tell you will be truth. Every word. You extend same courtesy to me. We have been blinded, hidden from galaxy. What has happened to you? Why is aether in agony?’

Xa’ven didn’t respond at once. He seemed to be trying to decide just where to start.

‘You know nothing of the Massacre?’ he asked, warily, as if the question were so stupid that he was opening himself to ridicule.

Yesugei extended a hand to him, offering to help him stand.

‘The Massacre?’ he asked. ‘No, we do not. Please, now, tell us everything.’

‘Thoughts, Khagan?’ asked Qin Xa.

The Khan grunted. He had plenty, though few he wished to share.

The Alpha Legion cordon remained intact, its smooth unity broken only by minor adjustments to the twin defensive lines. Every move that the Scars had made had been reflected by Alpha Legion warships in what had become a bizarre game of mirrors.

The Khan stood on the command bridge of the *Swordstorm* with his keshig around him. His dao felt heavy at his belt.

‘They seem to want us to move first,’ he said.

Qin Xa turned to the viewscreens. Dancing locator-runes reflected in the slanted lenses of his Terminator helm. ‘They are between us and the nearest jump-points, but we can break out if we

choose. A *zao,* enacted at speed, prepared with a limited full-front engagement to draw them in.'

The Khan nodded in agreement. 'I detect weakness there,' he said, gesturing to a position two-thirds of the way along the largest Alpha Legion formation. 'They have attempted to bolster it with bigger ships, but that does not disguise the problem.'

'It would have to be rapid,' said Qin Xa. 'Just as we did on Eilixo.'

The Khan pondered the options. 'And then what? We break the line, disrupt their patterns, and then what do we do? Destroy them?'

'Of course.'

'They have offered no threat.'

'These are not the actions of a friend, Khagan.'

That could not be denied. Despite that, the Khan still resisted making an order. Mere hours ago, the shape of the reported rebellion within the Imperium had been simple: Russ and his savages defying orders once more. Now it had become complex. Far more complex.

He remembered his last words to Horus on Ullanor. He remembered the Warmaster's winning smile, the easy manner.

You call, I answer.

Every fibre of him screamed for an alternative. The Warmaster had been wronged, somehow driven to desperate actions that had earned him the censure of jealous brothers. If Horus had indeed been forced to take up arms against Russ, then the Alpha Legion were clearly his allies. Were they waiting, to see if the White Scars would give them some sign? If so, what would that be? Was there a hidden signal, shared by the rest of his brothers but somehow hidden from him? It would not be the first time that such a thing had happened.

His mistress of star-speakers, a bone-thin Chogorian woman named Jian-Tzu, approached.

'Khagan,' she said, bowing low.

'If there is nothing new to report, do not trouble me,' snapped the Khan, his gaze remaining on the hololiths. 'I grow weary of rumours.'

The star-speaker did not hesitate; like all her kind, she was used to delivering uncomfortable truths to warrior-kings. 'I have orders from Lord Dorn.'

The Khan turned to her. 'And?'

'I interpreted them myself,' she replied. 'The meaning is clear, its origin unambiguous. We are ordered to return to Terra. We are ordered to ignore all other claims to our fealty, in particular those of the Warmaster, who has been declared traitor along with any Legion answering his summons. We are commanded to make the swiftest possible passage to the Throneworld where further instructions and further explanation will be given.'

Qin Xa nodded, satisfied. 'At last. Something concrete.'

The Khan remained unmoved. 'When did you get these visions?'

'Less than an hour ago. More are coming in all the time, and they are of the same nature.'

'The interference has cleared, then.'

'It appears so.'

'Then, my Khagan,' offered Qin Xa, 'we have our orders.'

The Khan shook his head. 'No, we don't.'

His keshig guard said nothing. They would not have dared.

'Do you not see what has happened here?' the Khan said, walking over to the lip of the command balcony and staring coldly up at the real-view blisters, beyond which the XX Legion ships waited. 'Do you not see why those ships have been hanging there, saying nothing, doing nothing?'

He felt the old stirrings of resentment again, the chill anger of the unregarded son. A price had to be paid for his inclination to freedom, for skirting along the edges of communication. The Scars

were always the last to know.

'They do not want to fight us,' the Khan said. 'Nor do they want to join us. They want to cause us doubt. They want to keep us here and to tie us up in questions. And why? Because they know the veil is lifting and that messages are only now getting through the aether.'

He turned back to his lieutenants. Clarity had finally dawned – some welcome certainty in the wake of so much doubt.

'They are the manipulators,' he said, his voice growing in strength. 'They *wanted* us to hear from Dorn. They kept us here until they could be sure we picked up his message. The Alpha Legion desire us to return to Terra. *That* is their purpose.'

For a moment, no one responded.

'Even so,' said Qin Xa, haltingly. 'Should we not–'

'No!' roared the Khan, long-burning anger suddenly bursting free. 'I will not take direction from anyone, not even from a Throneworld that only *now*, now that its Legions are tearing one another to pieces, deigns to remember that it has *eighteen* warrior-sons at its service.'

He whirled around to face the startled bridge crew, his cloak rippling.

'You are nobody's slaves,' he said, his voice low but firm. 'You are the ordu of Jaghatai. We take orders from no one. We take no one's word. We are on our own, just as we have always been, and if there is truth to be found in this, then we will find it for ourselves.'

He turned his gaze on Qin Xa. 'Give the order,' he said. 'Zao, just as we discussed.'

Then he turned back to the void, peaceful for now, but about to be lit up by the unified blaze of starship engines.

'Take your stations,' he said grimly. 'It is time we reminded our brothers just what we are capable of.'

NINE

Not the right time
Drifting
The Chisel

Torghun slipped into the meeting chamber in the bowels of the *Starspear*, going as quietly as his recently refitted power armour would allow. He had not had time to make the preparations that he would have liked, but the sudden flurry of orders and deployment plans had left no time for anything else.

He activated the lumens, lighting up the only other occupant of the chamber.

'Torghun Khan,' said Hibou, bowing.

'Hibou Khan,' Torghun replied in the Chogorian manner, closing the door behind him.

'A strange time to do this, brother,' said Hibou.

'Did you know about Russ?' asked Torghun. 'Tell me if you did – we should have no secrets.'

'I did not. We knew it would be something, though, and the Wolf King was as likely as anything else.'

Torghun shook his head. 'I never would have… I didn't think it would be them. Something told me it would start with one of the others. Curze, perhaps.' He drummed his fingers together, trying to still the agitation he felt. 'We should go after them now. I don't understand the delay.'

Hibou chuckled, tinny through his helm-vox. 'Look out of the viewports. We have guests.'

'That worries me. Are they with the Warmaster? Are they with the Wolves? What the hell are they doing?'

'The Alpha Legion has engaged the Wolves. I do not think the encounter was friendly.'

'Then we must leave the system!' blurted Torghun, whirling to face Hibou. 'This is the moment. Why else were we meeting, if not to force this?'

Hibou reached out, resting a gauntlet on Torghun's forearm. 'Calm yourself. Your agitation is unseemly.'

'Unseemly! This is a delicate time – you do not seem to appreciate quite how delicate.'

'I appreciate it more than you, I think.' Hibou's voice was firm. 'When the time has come, we will know it. I will be told of it.'

'How?' demanded Torghun. 'How are you getting this information? We do not discuss it in the lodge. You need to be more open with me.'

'When this is over,' said Hibou, 'when we have negotiated this difficulty, I will show you. I have been meaning to in any case. But listen to me – *this* is not the time. These are the stone-slips that start the avalanche. If we move too soon, the position will be ruined. Tell me, do you love Terra? Do you love the Imperium?'

Torghun could have struck him. 'You *know* I do,' he said, shaking off Hibou's hand.

'Then show some discipline.' Hibou looked at him levelly. 'For now, we make no move. We follow orders, we coordinate just as we always have done. In the meantime, you could spend some time with more Chogorians – you stick out like an ogryn in a beauty parlour.'

Torghun fought to control his irritation. 'I was not meant for this Legion,' he muttered.

'Horseshit,' snapped Hibou. 'You told me the story before, and I said the same then.' He drew closer, his voice lowering. 'There is no *fate* – you are a White Scars legionary. You can accept that

and play your part in what is to come, or you can sulk in the margins and accomplish nothing.'

Involuntarily, Torghun's mind shot back to Luna, to the transfer hangars, then to his first glimpse of the V Legion troop-lifter that would take him out of the Solar System for good. He remembered catching sight of the lightning-strike sigil, and how juvenile it had looked to him then – gold, white and red. Childish colours.

'*They* believe in fate,' said Torghun. 'All of them, preached at by the weather-magicians. The pattern of time, the will of heaven. They would walk into damnation happily if one of *them* commanded it. That is what I will never understand. Do you know we are laughed at by the other Legions? *Laughed at*.' He shook his head. 'It needs to change, brother. It can be changed, but only if the Warmaster–'

'Hush,' said Hibou, holding a warning finger up. 'Not here, not outside the lodge.' He drew in a deep, weary breath. 'We will wait for the Khagan's ruling. He will either go after Russ or play for time here.'

'And what of the Alpha Legion?'

Hibou snorted. 'Who knows? They're up to something, but there's such a thing as being too obscure.'

Torghun's helm-display suddenly flashed with a priority order-burst. From Hibou's silence he could tell that the other khan had also received it.

Zao-pattern fleet movement, enact in T-minus four. Take stations. Go swiftly, go surely, for the Warhawk and the Emperor.

They looked at one another.

'Seems the Khagan agrees with you,' said Torghun, moving quickly towards the door.

'Indeed,' said Hibou, following him. 'The Alpha Legion. I wonder if they know what's about to hit them.'

Torghun laughed hollowly. There were some things that he could appreciate in his Legion brothers – he'd never doubted their ferocity, their velocity, their flamboyance once given their head. He remembered how Shiban had been in the canyons of Chondax. For all his irritation at the Chogorian khan's constant pulling ahead, he'd been a little envious of his joy in battle.

Laugh when you are killing.

Torghun had told him that. The advice had been out of character but sincere enough. He wondered where Shiban was now, and what part he would play in the coming manoeuvre.

'Well, if they don't,' Torghun said, moving quickly down the corridor and towards his station, 'they're about to find out.'

Every starship in the service of the Imperium was different. The secrets hidden within their reactor hearts were jealously guarded by the lords of the Red Planet and shared with no one outside the privileged circles of the elect. Only the Legions' Techmarines had any profound understanding of the processes that propelled the vessels and kept them from disintegrating into the void, and even they were not made privy to the deepest secrets. Thus was the dominion of Mars over its creations assured.

That did not mean, though, that each Legion became powerless occupants of ships over which they had no control. Every primarch asserted various preferences during construction: Corax had worked obsessively to make his vessels as stealthy as possible, Vulkan to make them durable and Fulgrim to make them beautiful. Primarchs had ways of circumventing standard Imperial command structures – they could bend rules, uncover hidden datacores and suborn Mechanicum magi. So it was, as the Great Crusade progressed, that each Legion fleet slowly took on the character of its master through an endless programme of refits, retrofits and base modifications.

In the case of the White Scars, only one change was ever requested and only one metric was ever

improved upon.

Speed.

V Legion Techmarines spent decades boosting reactor power-feeds and finding ways to hone manoeuvrability far beyond the tolerances that each standard ship class had been designed for. The endless pursuit of velocity came with its costs: gunnery captains had been heard to complain of reduced lance range, and it was well known that a White Scars ship would not carry as many troops or drop-ships as the equivalent vessel in a standard fleet, but such factors carried little weight in a Legion drenched in the wild-riding tradition of the Chogorian plains.

Under standing orders from the Khagan, the Legion had never shown off its drives' modified capabilities outside of active warzones. Since so few of the other Legions had ever fought alongside the White Scars this specialism had not become widely known, except for a few speculative reports here and there of strangely elongated engine-housings, extravagant thruster formations and oversized fuel lines.

It all made for a ferociously fast set of warships, from the largest behemoths to the most slender of system-runners.

The *Kaljian* was no exception.

The frigate gradually picked up momentum, coasting out towards the screen of waiting Alpha Legion escorts.

'This is a standard zao,' Shiban reminded the bridge from the command throne. 'Full-fleet, enacted on a single command from the *Swordstorm*. You have your vectors and know your craft – do not disappoint me, brothers.'

He caught the expectant happiness on the faces of those working at their stations. The taut atmosphere of guess and counter-guess had been banished, replaced by a more familiar pleasure in doing what they were good at.

It was infectious, and Shiban found himself smiling. The White Scars had always been a harmonious Legion, free of the mordant temper of some of their counterparts; low spirits did not suit them.

'And do not outpace the leaders,' he warned.

All across the vast battlefront, White Scars escort craft moved as one, sweeping towards the encircling Alpha Legion forces in a unified screen. Inter-fleet communications were shut down and incoming bursts blocked – the enemy had had their chance to make themselves understood. Anything that they said now would be disregarded.

Behind the first wave came the cruisers, shining pure-white against the well of the void, their huge engines already burning hot. They pulled together, forming a tight battlesphere in the wake of the more strung-out vanguard. Shiban watched as one by one they raised their forward void shields, making the space around them glisten and blur.

Still far ahead of the *Kaljian*'s position, the Alpha Legion reacted. They maintained the integrity of the cordon, warding the routes to the nearest suitable jump-points and keeping the White Scars corralled within the vicinity of Chondax. As they had done ever since arriving, each ship of the blockade matched the movements of its White Scars counterpart, maintaining a gigantic mirror-image across space.

Shiban studied the tactical data watchfully. The two fleets were evenly matched – the Alpha Legion had clearly known just how many ships to bring to achieve their purpose. That alone was cause for some suspicion, especially if rumours of them taking on the Wolves were true. Just how many battleships did they possess? Had they been poised all the while for this, waiting for the veil to lift?

He remembered Phemus. The medal. The bodies.

His helm-display suddenly glowed with fresh orders.

‘Begin first phase.’

The *Kaljian* picked up speed, shunting power to its main lance and withdrawing it from the rear void shields. On either flank of the vanguard, other ships did the same.

Shiban felt his primary heart begin to beat harder, just as it would have done if he were in the saddle, sighting his prey.

‘That’s the target,’ he ordered, isolating a counterpart Alpha Legion destroyer on the forward scopes and marking it with an engagement rune.

The gap between the fleets closed. The Alpha Legion formation reacted just as a blockade ought to react, maintaining a rigid web across the widest area of space, each node backed up by a second rank of warships held in reserve. Their movements remained cagey, as if they wished to do nothing more than hold the impasse for as long as possible.

Shiban admired the discipline of the formation. They were well drilled.

It won’t help you.

The two vanguards closed to within lance-range. For the first time Shiban noticed incoming vox-requests from the enemy on the sensorium array, and ignored them.

It was too late now.

The first stabs of las-beams flickered out, initially along the Chondax-trailing edge, then rapidly spreading down the line.

‘Open fire,’ ordered Shiban calmly.

The *Kaljian*’s forward lance opened up, spitting a beam of coruscation directly at the target. The enemy void shields splashed with a corona pattern of static, and the ship reacted, ducking out of line, rolling away and returning a volley of broadside las-beams. Spearing bursts peppered the *Kaljian*’s dorsal void shields as the Alpha Legion ship thrust round to bring its own lance to bear.

‘Fire again, then pull away to four-five-two,’ ordered Shiban, giving it no time to gain a clear shot. He felt a faint tremble of deck-strain as the *Kaljian* came about.

All along the front, similar battles broke out – White Scars ships probing the line and Alpha Legion ships resisting them. It was a classic containment pattern, designed to hem the V Legion formation in and prevent isolated ships from running the cordon. The standard breakout response was a full-scale assault on the containment net, aiming to drive it back through a massed volume of concentrated ship-to-ship fire. Such an order was not taken lightly – the result would be ruinous for both sides, and only hotheads like Russ or Angron enjoyed taking such risks.

The Alpha Legion clearly judged that the Khan was not so cavalier. In this, of course, they were entirely correct.

Shiban’s helm-display updated again. ‘Second phase.’

The White Scars vanguard began to drift spinwards, pulling clear of their jump-point trajectory and dragging the centre of the engagement back towards Chondax’s gravity well. It looked almost careless, as if aimless commanders had launched a half-hearted breakout without the commitment to see it through.

‘Not too quickly,’ warned Shiban, watching closely as his crew let the *Kaljian*’s focus drift a little too low of the combat-plane. It had to look lazy, but taking a critical hit now would cause him problems.

The intensity of las-fire picked up. The *Xo-Jia* took a heavy blow to its shield generators and had to compensate with a ferocious return thicket of las-fire. An Alpha Legion corvette with the marker *Beta-Kalaphon* misjudged a forward move and blundered into a wall of plasma, shattering half its void shield coverage.

For all that, the engagements were muted, probing, restrained. No torpedoes were launched, no gunship wings were unleashed. The two walls of minor warships grappled in a bizarre half-embrace

of limited ferocity.

'Third phase.'

The drift became more pronounced.

'I think we can afford to move a little faster,' observed Shiban, watching with satisfaction as the White Scars line began to crumple inwards. Seven fast-attack frigates withdrew completely, slipping out of contention with their prows charred and their void-cover flickering.

All across the engagement zone, V Legion positions began to collapse, withering in the face of steady, professional pressure from the enemy. White Scars vessels dropped formation, protecting their own flanks and leaving holes in the offensive wall. As if fighting a strong headwind out on the Altak, the vanguard's momentum faltered.

Shiban stared at the forward scope intently, watching for the Alpha Legion response. They brought their capital ships up in support of the first wave, prudently applying pressure where they saw weakness. The net closed tighter, pulling together a little more. In doing so they brought more guns into range, but their rigidity began to suffer: they were cautious, but not too cautious.

The *Kaljian* bucked as it took a direct hit, the void shields flexing like drum skins before the energy was absorbed.

'Return fire?' came the query from the gunnery station. 'I have a lock.'

'I think not,' said Shiban, holding for the next order phase. 'Just run us back, and rotate to give them a new face. Maintain las-volleys, but make it look sloppy.'

As the *Kaljian* rolled backwards, veering away from the bulk of the incoming fire like a poorly crewed smuggler's rig, Shiban couldn't help wondering what Torghun was making of it. Back on Chondax, the Terran khan had hated feigned retreats, never adopting them while in command of his own Brotherhood. He had been a strange one, Torghun, uneasy with the things that made being a warrior of the V Legion the finest, most profound joy in the galaxy. Shiban, for all he had tried, had never really understood him – he briefly considered where Torghun might be now, and–

His helm-display suddenly gained another rune, immediately blink-clicked into a time-stamped order activation.

Shiban felt a spike of adrenaline, coupled with a rush of pure pleasure. The zao was under way.

Here we go.

'Stand by for fleet-wide switch,' he commanded, priming the bridge for action.

The chrono started to tick.

Ilya could hardly believe what she was seeing. She and Halji had been suffered to remain on the *Swordstorm*'s command bridge but soon found themselves shunted to the margins as the Khan's retinue had taken their spaces around the throne.

She looked over to where the primarch sat, surrounded by luminous hololith projections, his austere face locked in concentration. None of those around him – the huge warriors of his keshig, the ship commanders, the strategeos and zadyin arga – gave away the slightest discomfort at the mauling their fleet was taking.

'What's going on?' she hissed to Halji.

Her adjutant turned to look at her, his expression hidden behind a blank ivory facemask. 'What do you mean?'

'Has everything I've been doing here been wasted?' she asked, consumed with frustration at the prospect. 'The supply process was perfect this time. We had everything assembled ahead of schedule – we could have held them off indefinitely, and now… *this*. You convinced me, Halji, that your people knew void-craft.'

'We do.'

‘You’ve got a strange way of showing it.’

‘Are you watching carefully, szu? Do you see what he does?’

‘I see him throwing away a tactical position and getting his ships killed.’

‘Have not lost one yet.’

‘Damn you, you will soon.’ Ilya felt like rushing up and hammering her fists on his thick helm to knock some sense into him. ‘Does he not care? Is this just one more game to you all?’

Halji remained good-naturedly unmoving. ‘Everything is game. But no, he cares very much. Keep watching.’

Ilya turned back to the projected tactical image. It looked terrible – the half-hearted engagement was drifting into incoherence as the first wave of V Legion vessels was forced back in upon itself. Any structure to the advance had dissolved, lost in a maze of confused withdrawal lines. The Alpha Legion cordon, represented on the hololith by a bleak front of stolidly spaced blue lights, pushed back remorselessly.

She felt her pulse-rate quickening with anger. She had worked so hard to instil some sense of discipline into them – to make them take their logistic responsibilities seriously, to ensure that every warship they possessed was properly equipped and knew its function.

It was a shambles. She shuddered to think what would have happened if the enemy out there had been something properly terrifying. Like the Wolves.

‘I see noth–’

Before she had finished speaking, the Khan issued a command at last.

‘Now,’ he said simply. Even on a bridge crowded with warriors and busy with a hundred different activities, his low voice somehow carried to all corners. ‘Five second mark.’

Ilya saw the order-burst go out to every warship in the fleet, transmitted directly to the ship commanders’ helm-displays. Above her, suspended on bronze chains, a pict screen switched over to a countdown timer.

5… 4…

‘What was that command?’ asked Ilya.

3… 2…

‘Is important that this is synchronised,’ said Halji. ‘You should hang on to something.’

1.

There was no time. The deck suddenly kicked violently, as if something huge had detonated somewhere deep in the *Swordstorm*’s immense hull, and a roar filled the bridge’s airspace. Ilya staggered, clattering into Halji’s immobile armour and banging her forehead painfully against the ceramite.

He reached down to steady her, and she pushed him away, embarrassed. ‘We’re… *racing*,’ she noted, shocked, watching the fleet-spread suddenly contract. ‘Throne of Terra.’

The *Swordstorm* had kicked into full attack speed. The acceleration was incredible, an almost instant switch from dawdling quarter-power to a thunderous, booming, barnstorming charge. It should have been impossible – it should have taken whole minutes to key the main drives up.

‘As I said, szu,’ said Halji. ‘Keep watching.’

Ilya found her feet clumsily, grabbing hold of the edge of a balustrade railing and forcing herself to look up at the tactical hololiths.

Everything had changed. The fleet’s formation had morphed in an instant, suddenly switching from an aimless drift-pattern into an arrowhead shock assault of astonishing precision.

Every ship had moved. Every one of them, all at the same time. They were now in new trajectories and in perfect concert, suddenly leaping from semi-committed holding patterns into a single attack vector.

Ilya felt her mouth begin to hang open and snapped it closed. She had never seen shipmastery like it. The best Imperial naval officers could not have performed such a manoeuvre in less than five minutes, and it would have required hundreds of course-correction warnings and hours of preparation to bring off.

The White Scars had done it, as one – with no extraneous prompting – in five seconds.

By then, Halji was laughing. 'We call this zao,' he told her. 'The Chisel. It is... invigorating.'

Ilya stared up at the real-view ports, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

The White Scars deployment was now a single spearhead. Escorts shot out, pulling together into a single mass and punching a hole through the cordon. Their sudden burst of speed and concentrated lance-strikes wrong-footed the Alpha Legion vessels in their path, and three bronze-prowed destroyers were overwhelmed almost immediately, lost amidst a whirlwind of plasma and exploding torpedo trails.

Other enemy ships reacted, swinging about to plug the gap, but all too slowly. It took precious seconds to swing their lances around and push power to their idling engines, by which time the big V Legion bruisers – the *Tchin-Zar*, the *Lance of Heaven*, the *Qo-Fian* – had charged into the fray, thundering up the line forged by the runners and flooding the area with a blistering circlet of destructive las-power.

'How are you doing this?' breathed Ilya, watching the burning shells of Alpha Legion warships hurtle past.

More White Scars destroyers screamed through the wreckage, corkscrewing and diving like plunging pods of cetaceans. Everything was aimed at a single point: the flanks were discarded, surrendered to the enemy as every V Legion asset in the battlesphere shot into close formation and boomed up to top velocity.

'The weakness is there,' said Halji, motioning to a location two-thirds of the way along the Alpha Legion second rank. 'A slight one, but enough.' He nodded in warm appreciation of what was taking place. 'We race to get there first, and that would be honour worth remembering in verse.'

The bridge of the *Swordstorm* hummed and rattled as though it might shake apart. Warning lights glowed angrily along diagnostic displays, cheerfully disregarded by the bridge crew. The Alpha Legion's second rank swam towards them horrifyingly quickly, already glittering with distributed las-fire and hastily loosed torpedo batteries.

The encircling Alpha Legion cordon was now compromised and fractured, its constituents struggling to respond to the lone column of ships that burned its way through their heart. Their capital ships were even slower, unable to take advantage of modified engines or the Scars almost preternaturally skilled crews.

'A ruse,' Ilya said, annoyed with herself. 'You wanted them to relax.'

Halji nodded. 'There is advantage to being underestimated. And being fast.'

Despite herself, she laughed then. It was the first time she'd done so since the muster orders had come in.

What is happening to me? I am learning to love this stupid Legion.

The *Swordstorm* pulled up to the forefront of the Chisel formation, propelled by its monstrous, raging engines and surrounded by a swarm of racing escorts. Bulky vessels of the Alpha Legion second rank tried to bar its path, sliding into a hurried defensive formation with what now looked to Ilya like ponderous clumsiness.

'Those ones are big,' she said cautiously.

'They look like battle-barges,' agreed Halji. 'But Khagan does not think they are. One Legion cannot engage this many without some improvisation – they do not have the ships. Let us see.'

Ilya found herself gritting her teeth as the *Swordstorm* barrelled into range. Its gigantic lances

flared briefly, filling the void with the thrown light of a bounded supernova. All around it, other White Scars warships launched forward-facing barrages, vomiting las-beams and plasma bolts and torpedo salvoes in a vast, intense column of pure destruction.

The explosions were instant: palls of spiralling immolation crashing out in swathes of igniting promethium, flooding the cold vaults of space ahead. Ilya saw a massive Alpha Legion vessel collapse entirely, falling away sharply as its engines imploded. Another three targets took horrific damage to their forward void shields, sloughing badly amidst sheets of rippling orange and neon-yellow.

Return fire was sporadic and insufficient, clattering and raking down the armoured prows of the racing White Scars vanguard and causing little damage.

'They're not battle-barges,' said Ilya. 'What are they then? Bulk troop-carriers?'

'It matters not,' said Halji. 'We are out.'

He was right. The Chisel had hammered its way through the cordon, breaking it open at its weakest point. The entire formation – tight-knit, long and slender like a throwing javelin – raced out into open space. The Alpha Legion struggled to regroup in its wake, pulling ships from the far-flung cordon formation like an octopus clutching its many limbs back to itself. They hadn't lost critical numbers of ships, but the sudden attack run had blown their formation wide open and destroyed the cohesion that they had so painstakingly built.

The White Scars run did not slow. If anything, free of the need to maintain a barrage of las-fire, it accelerated. The orb of Chondax fell rapidly away aft, mediated by the glowing corpses of a dozen burned-out warships.

'So what now?' asked Ilya. 'Do we finish them off? Or go for Russ? Or Terra? What's the plan?'

Halji looked over her shoulder, up to where the Khan still sat on his throne. The primarch's expression had not changed – no satisfaction, no elation, just the habitual aquiline fierceness, the solid concentration. His flagship hummed with the release of fearsome energies, powering into the open void like a loosed arrow.

'I do not know,' Halji said. 'My guess, knowing the Warhawk's mood? None of those things.'

TEN

The price of knowledge
Course set
Just another renegade

Sometimes it was better not to know.

Yesugei had often argued with Ahriman over the point. The Thousand Sons in general had never accepted that knowledge – any knowledge – should remain off-limits.

'All is good,' the Chief Librarian had told him once. 'The more, the better.'

But the old weather-makers of Chogoris had always resisted plumbing the depths of their craft, choosing to remain on the surface of it, honing a set of skills that they knew rested on deeper, more dangerous truths. That had always struck Yesugei as wisdom, not cowardice, for the sages of his home world had made a virtue of restraint.

'Everything has its perils,' Yesugei had warned Ahriman.

'You are too cautious,' Ahriman had replied. 'Does anyone even know what gifts you have?'

'Perhaps not, but why should I care?'

'Because it matters, how you are perceived.'

'You are perceived as dangerous. Does that not matter?'

Ahriman had looked rueful. 'You understand us. Do you think we are dangerous?'

Back then, Yesugei had not wanted to reply. *Sometimes I do*, he had thought.

Now, in his chambers on the *Sickle Moon*, he felt sick with knowledge, like he had ingested something poisonous that had got into his blood. The scale of it was hard to process, let alone come to terms with.

Xa'ven had explained it all in careful detail, omitting nothing. There were some details, of course, that even *he* didn't know, including the fate of his primarch.

'We do not know what happened,' said Xa'ven. 'I think I would know, somehow, if he had died. But perhaps not.'

The Salamanders legionary spoke slowly, deliberately, inflecting the syllables of Gothic with a rich Nocturnean burr. His words held no self-pity, nor anger – just a deep, calm defiance.

Yesugei's response to the news had been different: numbness, followed by a desperate sense of failure. He had sensed disturbances in the fabric of the universe for so long; perhaps he ought to have known, or guessed, or moved to investigate sooner.

That mood soon passed. Treachery on such a scale was unimaginable – he could not have known. No one could.

Horus. The Warmaster. The beloved son.

He looked up. He shared his chamber with three others: Lushan, Xa'ven and a dour Iron Hands legionary called Bion Henricos.

'You were telling me what happens next,' Yesugei said, forcing himself to keep asking questions.

'At first, it was only us,' said Xa'ven. 'My squad broke back into orbit on a captured Sixteenth Legion lander. Our own ship had been destroyed, so we were forced to dock with one of theirs and take it over.'

Yesugei smiled, despite himself. Xa'ven's deadpan delivery could be quite amusing. 'Just like that. You take over Sons of Horus frigate.'

Xa’ven looked at him blankly, his dark features hard to read. He did not smile much and his blank red eyes made following his expressions difficult. ‘It was challenging,’ he said in his rumbling bass voice, ‘but they were not expecting us. Ever seen the sons of Vulkan fight, White Scar?’

‘I have not,’ said Yesugei. ‘Though have heard is formidable.’

‘We took the ship,’ said Xa’ven simply. ‘It was called the *Grey Talon*. We renamed it the *Hesiod*. That is a sanctuary-city of our home world.’

‘I have heard of it.’

Xa’ven nodded in satisfaction. ‘Then we became renegades. We tried to make for Nocturne, but the Navigator had been injured. She died soon afterwards. The strain of fighting the warp storms, perhaps, or maybe her mind had turned – I do not think she had expected to see the things she witnessed.’

Henricos, the Iron Hands legionary, let slip a low growl through his dark metal faceplate. Unlike the others, he had not taken his helm off. ‘None of us did.’

‘And what of you?’ asked Yesugei.

‘Survivors fight on, here and there,’ said Henricos. His voice, unlike Xa’ven’s, was acid with bitterness. Yesugei could understand why – he clearly had no doubt over his own primarch’s fate. ‘Scattered. Some of us found each other.’

‘We seek out survivors,’ added Xa’ven. ‘There are only sixteen of us, but we hope to add more. Then we can strike back.’

Yesugei caught a strange look on Xa’ven’s face then, something like hunger.

‘And now you find us,’ the Stormseer said, making the Salamander’s thought explicit. ‘Warp-capable ship with living Navigator.’

Xa’ven nodded. ‘Henricos is a master of ship-systems. He has found a way to track warp wakes at distance, so we knew just where you would be translating.’

‘But why attack?’ Lushan asked. He was still irritated – the *Sickle Moon* had taken significant damage after an already battering warp passage.

‘We have learned to be careful,’ replied Xa’ven. ‘For all we know, every Legion has turned to the Warmaster. If you had been a Blood Angels ship, or Ultramarines, we would have done the same.’

Yesugei nodded with understanding. ‘And we are White Scars,’ he said. ‘Easy for you to believe we are renegade, yes?’

Xa’ven said nothing, but Henricos grunted mordantly. ‘Since you said it, yes.’

Yesugei smiled. ‘At least, then, we are honest with one another.’

‘You use warp-born powers,’ said Xa’ven, as if by way of explanation. ‘That, we have learned, is a sign of the enemy. They do not follow the Edict, and it cost us on Isstvan.’

Yesugei placed his hands together. Every piece of information he was given from that damned planet was painful to hear; such things were exactly what Ahriman and he had warned would happen if the Librarius was disbanded.

‘I follow commands of my primarch,’ Yesugei said. ‘If he orders me to stop using gifts, I do so, but the Khan is out of contact for a long time.’ He gave Xa’ven a half-apologetic look. ‘In any case, he will take no notice of Edict. None of us will. The gift is part of who we are, has been for long time. Imagine if I tell you to put away your flamers, or you, son of Medusa, your metal hand. Would you do it?’

‘You sound like one of Magnus’s sorcerers,’ spat Henricos.

‘I think,’ replied Yesugei, ‘they speak better Gothic.’

Xa’ven laughed – a rumble that spilled up from his enormous barrel chest. ‘And what are you doing out here, Chogorian? You are a long way from home.’

‘Are we? Our ship lost bearing a long time ago.’

‘We can help with that. What is your course?’

‘Chondax,’ replied Yesugei. ‘My primarch is there, though I do not know if he is aware of Massacre.’

‘He will be by now,’ muttered Henricos. ‘The whole galaxy will be. Soon we will see Horus’s bastards falling on worlds like locusts. Everything is open to them, every defence destroyed.’

Xa’ven raised a warning hand, but Henricos kept going.

‘Do you not see how futile this is? We can fight for a little longer, but Ferrus is gone. Vulkan and Corax are gone. It’s just stalling for time.’

‘We have discussed this many times, brother,’ said Xa’ven tolerantly.

‘And? You think there’s some way to turn this around? You’re a fool. I’ll kill as many of them as I can, and spit in their faces every time, but I’m not stupid enough to think it’ll change anything.’ Henricos swept his metallic deathmask around the chamber, as if daring someone to contradict him. ‘Vengeance, a little satisfaction, a share of pain. That’s all that’s left.’

Xa’ven shot Yesugei an exculpatory look. ‘Bion and I have somewhat different perspectives on the war.’

‘I see,’ said Yesugei. ‘What is yours?’

‘Victory will come,’ Xa’ven replied calmly and without hesitation. ‘I do not know from where, but it will come. We must be patient.’

Yesugei admired the sentiment, though from what he had been told he found it hard to share in it. ‘I hope you are right.’

‘Then are you with us?’ asked Henricos. ‘We could use some of that… What do you call it?’

‘Weather-magic,’ said Yesugei.

‘Stupid name.’ The Iron Hands legionary flexed his damaged shoulders. ‘Hurts when it hits,

though.'

'I have to get back to my primarch,' said Yesugei, directing his words to Xa'ven. 'I have dreams. Visions. He is in danger.'

Xa'ven looked back at him equivocally. 'That will be hard, and we have our own work.'

'Would you not fight better joined with another Legion? One intact, and dangerous, and full of spell-makers like me?'

'Would your Khan accept us? I know nothing of him.'

'Few do, but I speak on your behalf.' Yesugei smiled then, as warmly as he was able to in the circumstances. 'If you come with me.'

Xa'ven looked tempted, but cautious. He rested his chin, as black as burned embers, on his steepled gauntlets.

'It has been a hard road,' he said. 'At times, in the deep of the void-night, I was tempted to ask for guidance. You know, in the old way, like we were taught to forget. I never did it, for we long since stopped believing in gods and monsters. Maybe we should not have been so quick to forget them.'

Yesugei nodded. 'Both are real.'

'I wonder, though, what I thought might come of such guidance, had I pleaded for it? Would I be shown some sign, some way back? Would I stumble over Vulkan's trail?'

Henricos shook his head irritably. 'Foolish.'

'But something has occurred now. You have fallen into our path, though you know less than we do. What am I to make of this? Was it fated?'

'I do not believe in fate,' said Yesugei.

'Luck, then.'

'Even less.'

Xa'ven raised a black eyebrow. 'Then what do you believe in?'

'The Khan,' said Yesugei, as unhesitatingly and firmly as Xa'ven had spoken earlier. 'Help me find him. Something can still be saved.'

Henricos snorted disdainfully, but Xa'ven was no longer paying any attention to him. His ebony head nodded slowly, his thoughtful gaze never leaving Yesugei.

'We shall see,' he said. 'We shall see.'

The Khan rose from his throne, and his retinue stood back to let him pass. He walked slowly to the edge of the command dais, below which the full expanse of the flagship's bridge stretched away from him in terraced rows.

The galaxy's starfield glittered on the other side of the armourglass observation dome, a uniform screen of infinite space. He felt the familiar urge stir within him: to power into the unknown, to range across the void as he had once ranged across the grasslands of home, beholden to no one, as free as the hunting raptors that rode the high airs.

And yet, even the berkut are tamed, he thought to himself. *They come back eventually, summoned by the bells of their master.*

None of his command staff spoke. They remained silent as the entire White Scars fleet powered further from Chondax, leaving the Alpha Legion behind like a bad memory. A pursuit had not materialised yet. Even if it did, the Khan doubted that the enemy had anything fast enough to catch them.

For all that, he could sense his crew's burning questions. Qin Xa wanted to turn around, to finish what had been started, to board the Alpha Legion ships and demand answers.

It was a tempting proposition. Perhaps Alpharius was on board one of those ships. The Khan smiled grimly. It would be nice to drag that dissembler to his knees and rip the helm from his face.

That would have been a mistake. The Alpha Legion had their combat weaknesses but they were no fools. He would learn nothing from them unless they wanted him to have it, in which case it was useless.

He folded his arms across his chest and stared up at the stars, just as he had once done in the long night-chill of the Altak. The stars were his first memory. He still had fragmented recollections of muffled voices – and not Chogorian voices – shuffling around a casket in which he slept. He had dreams of whisperings in the dark, a rush of sudden indescribable speed, a whirl of dark stars and pearl-white skies, a sense of being momentarily suspended over an abyss of infinite, howling depth while greedy eyes regarded him with both fear and covetousness.

Years later he had come to understand what those visions were: confused recollections of something he had not the faculties to understand at the time, dreams of unearthly powers at once more powerful than imagination and weaker than the sickliest human newborn.

'The denizens of heaven are nothing without us,' Yesugei had told him many years later. 'They may only act through us. That is their great secret, and their great shame. We do not have to listen – we can go our own way.'

The zadyin arga had always understood the relationship between the realm of the senses and the realm of dreams, and the Khan had always trusted what they said of it.

'There are two great errors,' a long-dead sage of Kai had written in scrolls still preserved in Khum Karta. *'First, to pretend that the path of heaven does not exist, second, to follow it.'*

Perhaps Russ had tried to snuff out the gifted forever. The Khan could well imagine Horus taking a stand against it; he was a noble soul, the noblest of them all. Sanguinius, too, had always been pure of purpose, and the third member of the triumvirate. From the very start, it had been the four of them – the Khan, Magnus, Sanguinius, with tacit approval from the one who would one day be Warmaster. It was they who had laboured for so long to channel and protect the arts of the psyker within the Legions.

Now, if he was to believe what he was being told, one was dead and one was missing.

And what of Horus?

Which story was the truth? That he was the defender of those wrongly slain by the Wolves, or that he threatened to level the Imperium to its foundations? The Khan had never much cared for the Imperium, but *truth* – that was important. As was loyalty.

That is the difference between the warrior and the butcher. Which one are you, brother? I know which I am.

'Khagan.'

He turned to see Jian-Tzu, his Mistress of Astropaths, looking up at him, her sightless eyes like milky orbs of glass in her withered face. 'More from Dorn?' he asked.

'From Russ,' she replied. 'Distress calls from the Alaxxes Nebula, demanding immediate assistance. The Wolves are under attack from the Alpha Legion. He asks his brother to remember the bonds of fealty between primarchs and come to his assistance with all the speed you are renowned for. He ends with his thanks.'

The Khan turned to his retinue, smiling coldly. 'Did you hear that?' he asked. 'The Wolf King complimenting us. He must be desperate.'

Qin Xa looked at him steadily. 'Will we go?' he asked. 'And if we do, who shall we fight for?'

Jemulan Noyan-Khan, whose presence was a glittering hololith projection from the *Starspear*, shook his head. 'The Space Wolves have always been renegades. Either we leave them alone, or we do what we have been asked and destroy them.'

'They're fighting the Alpha Legion,' said Hasik Noyan-Khan, also a projection. 'Refresh my memory – were we not just fighting them ourselves?'

The Khan crossed his arms, his hawk-like face still playing with the remnants of wintry amusement. ‘Who knows what the Alpha Legion were up to,’ he said. ‘Perhaps they too have their renegades.’

‘Then what is your order, Khagan?’ pressed Qin Xa, ever eager to be given licence to cut loose. ‘The fleet is armed and ready.’

The Khan rested his chin on the gold-limned magnificence of his gorget. The atmosphere in the bridge seemed to thicken, curdling with anticipation. All faces remained fixed upon him.

‘Send this message to Russ,’ he said finally, lifting his heavy eyes towards the Mistress of Astropaths. ‘Tell him that we have received commands from Dorn to return to the Throneworld. Tell him that we cannot ignore them, much as we might like to.’ He closed his eyes, shaking his head, changing his mind. ‘No, no lies. Tell him that we could ignore Dorn’s order, but we will not. The truth is not obvious to us. We need time to uncover it.’

The Khan uncrossed his arms and rested his right hand on the hilt of his dao. ‘Tell him that we have received disturbing news concerning Prospero, which we hope is false. Finally, tell him that, when the full picture is drawn, we hope we will fight beside one another again as brothers, as we were meant to. Then wish him a safe winter, or whatever it is they wish one another when they have finished speaking.’

Jian-Tzu bowed and hastened away to begin the sending. Once she had gone, Qin Xa was first to speak.

‘Then we are heading to Terra?’ he asked, disappointment evident in his voice.

‘That is the question,’ said the Khan, turning away from the retinue and gazing back up at the starfield. ‘Summon the Navigator. I have course instructions to give him.’

Russ took the news in silence, gripping the thick fur of the two Fenrisian wolves that prowled at his feet. Bjorn watched him, noting how the primarch’s ice-blue eyes glistened with suppressed emotion.

The viewports of the *Hrafnkel*’s bridge were almost opaque with rust-red dust. The entire fleet hung in the depths of the nebula, sunk amidst the shifting clouds like fish in a reef. The aftermath of Prospero had given them time to learn every nook and shaft of the immense stellar nursery – its gravitic variances, its sensor-defying baffles. Now their warships skulked in its depths again, recovering, re-arming, and waiting.

Somewhere far above them, the Alpha Legion still probed and patrolled, sending void-charges spinning blindly at them, prowling across the cloud margins like circling jackals. They would discover the fleet’s precise location soon enough, but the respite had staved off destruction until then.

It had been a ruinous, terrible retreat. Only Russ’s presence had prevented it from becoming a rout; he had held things together seemingly by sheer force of will, orchestrating lightning counter-thrusts, flanking moves, sudden fall-backs, all with the aim of getting as many ships into the heart of the nebula as possible before devastation overtook them.

Bjorn studied him carefully. Something of the ebullience the primarch normally displayed seemed to have been kicked out of him. He looked bruised, almost resentfully so, as if his faithful duty had been rewarded with nothing more than a face full of ashes.

‘Until next winter?’ Russ asked. ‘He really said that?’

The star-speaker nodded. ‘An attempt at politeness, I think.’

Russ snorted.

Bjorn moved a little closer, ignoring the thrumming growl of the primarch’s wolves. ‘So we’re on our own,’ he ventured.

Russ nodded, not looking at him, his face tight with preoccupation. ‘We are.’

‘They have always been unreliable.’

‘They have.’

Bjorn felt awkward. It was hard to witness a primarch's self-doubt. Russ seemed to sense it, and stirred himself.

'You know why I wanted you close to me, One-Hand?' he asked.

Bjorn shook his head.

'You're young. We can all see times are changing.' Russ fixed him with those penetrating, frosty eyes. 'Let's be honest – we knew that something was wrong before Prospero. We're used to spectres on Fenris. We never believed the myths my Father tried to tell us. Now that it's come at last, we can't feign surprise.'

One of the wolves nuzzled against Russ's thigh, pushing its blunt, fanged head along the ridged ceramite as if to comfort its master.

'I never asked him what he had in mind for us once the Crusade was over,' Russ went on. 'I never asked him if we would be needed. Hardly matters now – if this madness can't be stopped there will never be a time when we are not needed.' Russ chortled emptily. 'The irony of it. Horus has given us the purpose we were beginning to lack. He's made us useful again.'

Bjorn said nothing.

'You will inherit this,' Russ said. 'Look what a mess we have made of things – me and my beloved brothers. You will have to pick up the pieces.'

'Horus caused it,' objected Bjorn.

'And why did he turn?' asked Russ sadly. 'Do we know? Has that story been told?' He shook his shaggy blond head. 'Remember how this happened, One-Hand. Remember it all. The Legion will need you to keep the knowledge alive.'

'You will not leave us,' said Bjorn, almost as if by asserting it he could be sure it were true.

'I will one day,' said Russ bleakly. 'You, I am not so sure. Your wyrd is unclear to me.'

Then he moved himself, rolling his shoulders as if to throw off a cloak of lethargy. 'But enough of this. We have work to do.'

He glanced up at the nearest viewscreen. The vast profile of the *Fenrysavar* crawled across the view-field, its back scorched and half broken. The *Hrafnkel* itself would not look much better.

'The Khan be damned,' said Russ. 'He's always gone his own way, and we can manage without his swordplay. We've never needed help before – it was a mistake to ask for it.'

He grinned. Something of the old bravado was returning.

'We'll be back,' he said, grabbing the nape of the nuzzling wolf and ruffling it affectionately. 'This is the lowest point. We'll sharpen our claws and blades.'

The feral smile intensified.

'Trust me,' he growled. 'They haven't seen the last of us.'

PART TWO

GLASS AND EMBERS

ELEVEN

Dregs of Phemus
Bearers of the Word
Old lies

Shiban waited outside Hasik Noyan-Khan's chamber, absently turning the medal over in his hand. He'd come over to the *Tchin-Zar* on a fleet transport during one of the brief drops out of the warp. On the trip across he had watched the emblem of the Horde of the Stone – a blunt mountain-outline, ringed by fire – grow steadily larger as he had neared the docking levels.

The Horde was Hasik's Legion division, comprising over twenty brotherhoods. The *Tchin-Zar* itself was a fine ship – a long, lithe, spare-jowled predator. One day, if the fates allowed, Shiban could see himself commanding a similar vessel. Rising to the position of khan had been an honour. To ascend to noyan-khan would gild that further.

Maybe in the future. He would need many more kill-marks on his ritual sash first, and the scars that went with them.

A chime sounded on the console and the doors slid open. Hasik was standing on the far side, out of armour, his sun-wrinkled face smiling.

'Shiban,' he said. 'Back with us again. How are you?'

Shiban bowed. 'Well, noyan-khan. And you?'

'The better for leaving Chondax.'

Hasik ushered him into a large room with roughly plastered walls. It was decorated with Chogorian hunting talismans, and Qo ceremonial spears hung in racks. Six viewports along the left-hand side of the room were shuttered against the aether.

Hasik strolled across a hide runner towards two low-slung wooden seats, slatted and bound in the old plains manner. He sat in one and gestured to the other.

'You reached the fleet just in time,' he said. 'Any later and you'd have been fighting through them to get to us.'

Shiban sat, the medal still clutched in one hand. 'Why were they even there?'

Hasik shrugged. 'We don't know. This isn't like the old wars.'

'Evidently.'

Hasik regarded him. 'Being khan suits you, Shiban. Yesugei always spoke well of you.'

'He is generous.'

'Not always. How was the work on Phemus Four?'

'Foul.' There was little point in hiding the truth. 'For a long time I wondered why it had taken so long to purge. Once I got there, I stopped wondering.'

Hasik chuckled. 'The task is always completed, though.' He leaned back in his chair. 'Why did you wish to see me?'

'About Phemus. There were things that concerned me.'

'Oh?'

'I was told the delay in compliance was down to the hain,' said Shiban. 'They did fight hard, but it felt wrong. The whole planet felt wrong.'

'It was a difficult campaign.'

'No more so than many others. I asked my brotherhood to look harder.'

‘And what did they find?’

‘Bodies,’ said Shiban. ‘Buried, with legionary blade wounds and no sign of greenskins around them.’

‘Legionary blades? You are sure?’

‘My Apothecary made a careful study. He is sure. I was going to ask you if you had received any similar reports.’

Hasik placed his hands together. ‘None at all.’

Shiban nodded slowly. ‘That is a shame. I had hoped to find some explanation.’

‘Other than the one you have. Tell me what that is.’

‘No, I do not have one. There were no other deployments on Phemus. We were alone with the greenskins.’

Hasik thought for a moment. ‘But you think there were others.’

‘No.’ Shiban shook his head, still caught between several half-worked theories. ‘I do not know. My first thought was strife between brotherhoods. Then the Alpha Legion arrived at Chondax – it crossed my mind that… But why would they?’

‘That Legion’s actions are never obvious,’ Hasik sighed. ‘Perhaps even to them. Have you consulted others?’

‘Outside my brotherhood, no.’

Hasik nodded. ‘I authorised all deployments to Phemus. I can look again at the casualty figures – szu-Ilya keeps complete records these days. But you came here for more than that.’

Shiban opened his fist. ‘It may be nothing. We found this on one of the bodies. I have never seen it before.’

He handed Hasik the medal. The noyan-khan held it up to the light, turning it slowly.

‘This is a Chogorian mark,’ Hasik said, noting the hawk’s head. ‘Silver? Not pure, surely. Did you analyse it?’

‘We did not have time.’

Hasik handled the medal carefully, as if something about it made him uneasy. Shiban understood that – he’d felt the same way.

‘Leave this with me,’ said Hasik. ‘The zadyin arga may wish to see it. And, please, remain on the *Tchin-Zar*.’

‘What do you think?’

‘A battle-token? Perhaps. In any case, you were right to bring it to me.’

Shiban felt relief. It had been hard to decide whether to raise the issue at all.

‘One thing,’ added Hasik thoughtfully. ‘Do you have Terrans in your brotherhood?’

‘None.’

‘But you fought with them.’

‘On Chondax. The Brotherhood of the Moon, under Torghun Khan.’

Hasik nodded. ‘I see.’

‘If I may ask–’

‘I do not know. It might be helpful, it might not. I will make inquiries.’

Shiban saw that it was time to leave. He rose to his feet and bowed. ‘Thank you, noyan-khan. Please tell me if there is anything more to be done.’

‘There will be, I am sure.’ Hasik didn’t rise. He toyed with the medal, turning it in his hand just as Shiban had done. ‘I will contact you before the next warp translation.’

Shiban hesitated. He was pushing his luck. ‘I do not suppose–’

‘I know where we are going? Of course I do, though the Khagan has kept that knowledge close. You will find out soon enough.’

Shiban nodded. *More secrecy.*

'My thanks, noyan-khan,' he said, bowing.

The Word Bearers deep-void frigate *Vorkaudar* dropped out of the warp, slipping from the aether as smoothly as a dagger into flesh. The sub-warp engines keyed into a steady pattern, propelling it from the jump-point and towards Miirl's distant green orb.

Kal Zedej, sergeant of the Yesa Takdar embedded cadre and commander of the *Vorkaudar*, strolled to the railing of the bridge-balcony, watching the planet grow in size. It had a pleasing hue – cool, he thought, beyond the ragged swathe of tumbling rocks that orbited it.

'Signal the outpost,' he ordered, clasping the rail with his gauntlets.

'They are silent, lord,' came the reply from one of the serfs in the communications pit.

Kal's eyes narrowed. 'All channels?'

'Nothing yet. I will keep trying.'

The *Vorkaudar* kept going, powering steadily closer.

'Raise the void shields,' commanded Kal. 'Slow approach. Run a full augur sweep.'

His crew worked silently and swiftly. He watched their bald and tattooed heads bowed low over cogitator stations, strained faces lit green and orange by the glow from the pict-feeds. Long gone were the bridge uniforms they had once worn; now they were in the flowing robes of the faith, lovingly stitched by acolytes in the lower decks, covered in the tiny gold-picked writing that warded them and concentrated their minds.

Kal remembered a time when he would have risked censure for a display like that. It was preferable now – allegiances had been flushed out and the long years of secrecy were coming to an end.

It was good to know who the enemy was, to fight him openly and use his weakness against him. The pantheon smiled upon those who bore the truth with pride.

'Anything?' he asked.

'Silence. Nothing over the augurs.'

'Bring us in over it. Carefully.'

The *Vorkaudar* thrust closer, skirting the cartographed belt of drifting asteroids, scanning incessantly. A blip recorded on one of the sensorium feeds, followed by a crackle of static.

'Relay Nine Eighty-Nine,' came the voice of an augur-reader.

'Are they hailing us?' asked Kal.

'Standard low-beam transmission. Recorded. No sign of activity.'

Kal blinked the feed from the sensors to his helm display. He saw the asteroid designated '78976-764' rolling slowly in the void, one face riddled with dark metal scaffolds. A communications spire was visible in the centre, spiked and entwined like a minaret of lost Monarchia. There was no sign of damage, but no lights either.

He ran his filed teeth over one another. This would hold things up. It would keep him from greater things. There was no glory in this.

'Is the station shielded?'

'Negative.'

'Then I will investigate. Remain in position. Notify me if anything changes.'

Kal signalled the others. Ledak had been in devotions and was irritated to be disturbed. Rovel had been doing something secretive in the bilges with mortals, one of those things that stained his gauntlets red and made him morose afterwards. It was probably a good thing that he was being called away.

They joined him on the teleportation chamber – an octagonal room clad in iron. The floor was sticky and coppery, and there were scratch-marks on the lower walls.

‘Is this necessary?’ asked Ledak, his voice surly.

‘Essential,’ said Kal. Rovel was muttering to himself and fingering his chainblade’s hilt.

Kal silently sent the command to activate the chamber. He could remember when teleportation had always been a clumsy matter of battleplate locators and pseudo-science. So much easier now that some superstitions had been cast off.

‘By your will,’ he ordered, scanning the outpost floor plans.

The chamber filled with a dense crackle, hot even through his power armour. For a few seconds he felt the familiar rush – the balmy sensation of weightlessness, the roaring in his ears. There were times when he envied those who had delved deeper into the mysteries and stared directly into the abyss.

Then it was over, and the aether ripped away into tattered slivers around him.

‘Dead,’ said Rovel.

Kal looked around warily, and agreed. The outpost’s command chamber was empty – no lumens, no bodies. A few screens still fuzzed with static, throwing a flickering light across the otherwise pitch-dark space.

He drew his bolter. ‘Check for targets,’ he voxed, gently expanding the range of his proximity detectors.

Ledak moved towards the centre of the circular chamber. An empty throne swivelled loosely on a short plinth. Rovel stomped down to the perimeter pits.

‘Abandoned?’ he speculated, sweeping his bolter muzzle lazily from side to side.

‘We’d have been told,’ said Kal, moving down to the dual sliding doors and scanning the other side. ‘Are you getting anything yet?’

‘Nothing,’ growled Ledak, falling in alongside him. ‘How big is this place?’

Kal remembered the floor plans. It was a self-sufficient station designed for long-term relay augmentation. Several dozen levels, a big power plant. Could take a while to sweep it.

‘Not that big. Stay with me.’

The doors hissed open jerkily, jamming halfway across. Ledak grabbed the near edge and yanked it, nearly ripping the metal clear of the frame. They entered the corridor – a long, segmented tube with a metal-mesh floor. It was as empty and echoing as the command chamber.

‘Getting nothing,’ complained Rovel, bringing up the rear. ‘Nothing at all.’

Kal turned on him, ready to reprimand. As his did, something flashed across his vision: a *spectre*, stark white, death-eyed, furious.

‘What was that?’ he hissed, jerking around with his bolter.

Ledak kept walking. ‘What was what?’ He arrived at another dual set of doors at the end of the corridor.

‘Stay where you are,’ ordered Kal. He suddenly felt like he did during battle. His hearts were pumping, flooding his body with hyper-adrenaline. ‘I got something. Briefly.’

But he hadn’t. The corridor was empty, save for the three of them.

Rovel paused, still standing astride the ruins of the first set of doors. ‘Nothing,’ he said again.

‘Enough of this,’ snarled Ledak, and hit the release on the second set.

‘Do not–’ began Kal.

The doors slammed open, flooding the corridor with light. In the fraction of a second it took for his helm to compensate he saw something standing in the glare. Something immense and blocky.

Then the space filled with bolter fire.

Kal threw himself against the wall, returning fire blindly. He heard a throttled roar from Ledak behind him, quickly quelled. Suddenly his helm was filled with targets – more than ten of them, swarming close.

A bolt hit him hard, sending him crashing onto his back. He kept firing. From somewhere nearby he could hear Rovel roaring. His voice was bestial and strange, using words that Kal had never heard.

Kal pushed to his feet and sprinted back for the command chamber, ducking through the pursuing storm of bolts before leaping over Ledak's body. As he staggered through the doors he took a shell in the back, smashing him forwards. He hit the floor awkwardly, rolling to his left to keep firing.

He saw the blurry outline of power-armoured warriors charging after him down the corridor, followed by the sharp stink of the aether. He raised his weapon to fire, watching as a target-rune zeroed in on the lead attacker.

'*Away*,' came a voice, seemingly from by his ear.

Kal's bolter flew from his grip, clanging against the wall and rattling out of reach.

He twisted around to see a white figure standing over him, outlined in flickering lightning. The figure's head was exposed, showing a pair of eyes blazing with gold.

Kal tried to get back up, to push himself at him, to get his hands around his throat. He was blasted back, smashed against the metal. His helm clanked down as though magnetised, and he felt worm-like strands of aetheric energy snaking across his armour. As he hit the floor, Rovel's ranting finally gave out.

The white warrior lowered himself over Kal's outstretched body.

'I never liked Lorgar's dogs,' he said, his accent strange.

Kal stared up blearily at a weathered face dense with tattoos. He wanted to speak – to spit curses at his killer – but his tongue would no longer move.

As the last of the bolter-echoes died down, others came to join the witch; some in Salamanders armour, one in an Iron Hands augmetic shell. Kal raged at his bonds.

The witch glanced coldly at him. 'Do not struggle. Is pointless.'

The whole place reeked of warp energy. That surprised him. The faithless Legions were meant to have renounced all that.

The Iron Hands legionary stomped up to the witch. His armour had been extended with a bizarre array of flamboyant mech-additions. His shoulder plates bulged massively, each one humming with electrostatic charge.

'The others are dead,' he reported in a machine-thin voice. 'This one?'

'Not yet,' said the witch, gazing at Kal like he might look at a rotten slab of meat.

For some reason Kal's mind felt sluggish, and he found it hard to place the emblems on the witch's armour. Space Wolves? No, too clean.

He got it. White Scars. Now that – *that* – was a genuine surprise.

The witch glared at him.

'I will prise open his mind,' he said, and Kal felt the first stabs of pain at his temples.

'Go swiftly,' came a third voice – rich with the mournful timbre of Vulkan's sons. 'We should take the ship now.'

'We shall do no such thing,' said the witch. 'Better to persuade.' He leaned in close, his golden eyes glowing. 'Now, *you* will listen.'

Ilya waited outside, wondering if she had intruded, unwilling to retreat without being given a signal. She felt like a fool, hovering on the margins.

Qin Xa seemed oblivious to her presence. He knelt behind screens of translucent paper, robed in silk, surrounded by coils of incense smoke. His bare head was lowered before a hung scroll, blank save for a single Khorchin character drawn in the ancient Chogorian manner.

Ilya knew that he would have drawn the device himself, dipping a thick aduu-hair brush into soot-bound ink and tracing swiftly over the paper. He might have done it a thousand times, discarding each

attempt until it became perfect.

There was no arduous labour involved in such work. It was a sudden movement, dragged straight from the soul. It was either perfect or it was not; once drawn, there was no way to improve or correct it.

Ilya wondered whether Qin Xa knew that she was there. It was hard to imagine that he did not, but Halji had told her once that meditation was an absolute thing. Perhaps even Space Marines let their guard down from time to time.

So she stood in the shadows, breathing as quietly as she could, trying not to do anything to break the spell.

After a long time, Qin Xa's head rose. He stood in a single movement and bowed before the scroll. The gesture was curiously religious, like something that might have taken place before Unity, though there was no iconography to draw upon – just the scroll, the incense in its brass censers, and the layers of paper hanging in a perfect square from the dark walls of the isolation room.

Ilya swallowed self-consciously as Qin Xa pushed the screen aside and emerged into the open. His craggy face gave no hint of surprise.

'Szu,' he said. 'You are early.'

Ilya could have argued about that – she was not, she was perfectly on time, as ever, and he had no chrono – but chose not to. 'I can come back.'

'No need. I am finished.'

She wanted to ask him what he'd been doing, but guessed that would have been impertinent. It might have been part of the warrior rites that had made Qin Xa the most lethal swordsman in the Legion after the Khan himself, or it might have been some hang-over from the old days of Chogoris. Few of those who had been with the Khan from the beginning still lived; most had died before the Emperor arrived, and others had attempted Ascension when too old, disregarding what they had been advised by the Terran Apothecaries.

Qin Xa had made it, as had Yesugei. Perhaps Hasik was another.

'You have completed the fleet audit,' he said.

'I have.'

'The Khan wished to know the results.'

Ilya took a deep breath. 'Seventy-three per cent of Legion's assets were committed to the Chondax campaign. During the fighting, five brotherhoods were sequestered for other duties, though none were able to leave. Of those not committed to Chondax, twelve per cent remained on Chogoris, six on secondment with other Legions, and six were unaccounted for.'

Qin Xa nodded. 'You are short by three per cent.'

'No, your records are. I also did not allow for special deployments, such as those on Terra, on Mars or with the Navigator houses.'

'Tell me then, is this standard?'

'You mean compared to the others? No. Most Legions were deployed more thinly, led by lord commanders across a variety of fleets. As far as I know, based on the figures I saw two years ago, only the Space Wolves and the Blood Angels were more cohesive.'

Qin Xa nodded thoughtfully. His expression was serene, as it was so often with the Scars. 'So, if someone wanted us out of the way – all of us, as a Legion – sending us to Chondax would have done the job well for them.'

'Is that what you think happened?'

'We are still trying to make sense of the Alpha Legion.'

Ilya smiled wryly. 'You could have engaged them, back at Chondax.'

'It would not have given us answers.'

‘But were you not tempted to, just a little?’

Qin Xa shrugged. ‘The Khan was. I could sense it, no matter what he ordered. But we are past that now – he has more pressing concerns. Accompany me, please.’

He moved off, opening the door into a conventionally lit walkway. Ilya trotted alongside, struggling as ever with the oversized stride of Space Marines.

‘There is a saying on Chogoris,’ said Qin Xa. ‘*Better to be ignorant than wise*. Many of us agree with that. We do not concern ourselves with what the other Legions do. So we were ignorant of what the rest of the Imperium was doing, and happy to be so. This is now the problem.’

Ilya raised an eyebrow. ‘You could not have known what was happening. Chondax was isolated for a long time.’

‘Yes, a strange chance.’

‘Such things happen.’

‘No, not this time. We were complacent. If Yesugei had been here he might have warned us.’

Ilya shook her head. ‘You can’t just isolate a whole subsector. You can’t just orchestrate warp storms.’

Qin Xa didn’t reply immediately. When he did, his voice was pensive. ‘You were taught that humanity has moved beyond superstition. You believe it, just like you were meant to. There are no gods, you were told, and what looks like magic is just the growing power of the human mind.’ He glanced at her almost furtively. ‘We, on the other hand, never stopped believing. On Chogoris it is called the Test of Heaven. We have always known of it. How do you think Stormseers become powerful? Our cousins on Fenris work the same source, though they would never admit it.’

He walked easily, fluidly.

‘You do not know what the warp is. None of you do. The Emperor kept those truths hidden, and for all we know he has tried to stamp out those who still understand them. The Khan never agreed with this. The two of them argued. This is the great question, szu, the one they fell out over – can you rest an empire on a lie?’

Ilya didn’t like hearing this. Much of what the Scars had told her had always sounded strange and uncomfortable, and she had learned to ignore the most esoteric of their views. But this… this sounded close to rebellion.

‘I do not–’ she started.

‘Listen,’ said Qin Xa, halting and turning to her. ‘Just listen. The warp is not what you think. It is alive. It is dangerous. It can be used. We of the Fifth would not be told otherwise, and that is why we were never trusted and why we have never been at the centre of things.’

‘That’s not how it is.’

‘It is why Nikaea happened. The Imperium is wilfully blind. Deliberately so. It has never wished to look at what holds it together.’

‘What does this have to do with Chondax?’ asked Ilya, growing flustered.

‘One can orchestrate warp storms.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘It takes enormous power, or devices of ancient origin, but it can be done.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘You need to know the Khan’s mind,’ said Qin Xa levelly. ‘You need to know what the dilemma is.’

‘So what is it? Tell me now – no riddles.’

Qin Xa looked at her with perfect earnestness. ‘When we are told that Russ has gone after Magnus, we can believe it. When we are told that Horus has become a monster, we can believe it. It is the *warp*, Ilya. It corrupts the finest – the greater the strength, the greater the corruption. Perhaps the Emperor himself has succumbed, perhaps the Warmaster has. In either case, it means ruin.’

Ilya looked into Qin Xa's eyes and saw the steady certainty there. Whatever the truth of this, *he* believed it.

'Then what are you going to do?' she demanded. 'You have a whole fleet here, burning through the void, and no one has told me where it's heading.'

'I am trying to tell you. We are headed for the source, to the architect. Only one soul sees the warp as it truly is.'

'Terra,' said Ilya, relieved. 'So we are going to Terra.'

Qin Xa looked at her, disappointed. 'No,' he said. 'Have you not been listening? We cannot go to Terra.'

He rested a hand on her arm. 'The Khan has only ever trusted one of his brothers. If Magnus lives then all this can be salvaged – if he is dead, then the Imperium is finished for us. We are going to Prospero, szu. The answers are there.'

TWELVE

One truth
Surprised to see you
Memories of Ullanor

Kal recovered himself.

'Ledak?' he voxed. His tongue was thick, his head hammering. 'Rovel?'

He blinked heavily, clearing the mist across his eyes. He flexed a gauntlet – it worked. That was something.

'Anyone?'

He pushed himself to his feet. He must have fallen. He was disorientated. Everything around him seemed to move sluggishly.

He blink-switched to the ship channel. 'Status,' he rasped.

The *Vorkaudar*'s communication operator's voice, when it came, sounded relieved. '*We had been concerned, lord. Your signal was lost. Is all well?*'

Kal didn't know. He felt nauseous. The space around him was empty and dark. He felt as if he'd forgotten something important.

'I don't have a lock on Ledak or Rovel,' he said.

'*They were with you on the transition. We no longer have loci for them.*'

Kal started to walk. The metal walls around him were scorched and dented. He ran a proximity check, and brought up nothing. He couldn't even detect the *Vorkaudar* on the locator matrix. His skin prickled with uneasiness.

'*Did you find anything over there?*' queried the operator.

'What?'

'*The outpost, lord. Do you require anything further?*'

Kal stopped walking. His head throbbed with pain, slowing his thoughts and making him feel sicker. He had definitely forgotten something. Why couldn't he *think?*

'There's nothing here. Nothing. Here.'

A pause. '*We await orders, lord,*' said the operator, haltingly.

Kal felt like smashing his head against the wall – anything, to clear it.

'I'm coming back.'

'*Very good. I have a strong signal for you now. Lowering voids. You may transition when–*'

'Wait.' As soon as the operator uttered the words 'lowering voids', Kal remembered. *The White Scar. The Iron Hand.* 'Wait!'

It was too late. The aether surged around him again, raging this time, flaring crimson as he dissolved into it. In the fraction of a heartbeat as his body hurtled between realms he remembered it all.

When he rematerialised in the teleport chamber he was not alone.

Kal's hands leapt for his bolter, but too slowly. The White Scars witch raised a finger, immobilising him.

In an agony of frustration, Kal could only watch as the witch reached for a curved dagger. He could only watch as the blade pushed against his throat, nestling at the junction between helm and gorget.

'How long you been corrupted?' the witch asked.

Kal found that his lips could move again. He stared defiantly back at the White Scars legionary.

'Since we knew the truth,' he replied.

The witch looked at him, bewildered. 'Truth? What truth drive you to this?'

'The only one.'

'One truth.' The White Scar shook his head. 'How foolish.'

Then Kal's lips stopped working again. He heard the klaxons of other teleportation chambers and the heavy clump of power-armoured boots landing on metal. He felt the witch's power withdrawing from his mind like water running from a glass.

He tried to speak again, to lash out, to get to his bolter.

But the witch wasn't stupid. He pressed the dagger firmly, slicing clean through the armour seals. Kal felt the blade bite, parting his flesh and sinew with a hiss of faint disruptor charge, before his vision faded to black.

Yesugei pushed the body aside and strode out of the chamber. Henricos emerged from another opposite, followed later by Xa'ven and three Salamanders.

'Disgusting,' spat Henricos.

Yesugei looked at him quizzically.

'Sorcery,' said the Iron Hands legionary by way of explanation, shaking his hands loosely as if trying to shed some contagion. 'Sorcery was the root of it all.'

'No,' said Yesugei, starting to walk. 'Not at all.'

Xa'ven fell in alongside him. His hammer, held one-handed, crackled with a soft sheen of energy; he clutched a gold-limned bolt pistol in his other gauntlet. Yesugei's eyes were drawn to the weapons. The sons of Vulkan knew how to make their tools beautiful.

'He has a point,' Xa'ven said.

The doors at the end of the corridor slid open, revealing two robed crew members hurrying towards the teleportation chambers. As they saw the Space Marines, their eyes widened and they scrambled to get out of the way.

'Iron Hands technology conceals our presence on station,' said Yesugei calmly, bursting the crews' hearts with a single gesture. 'My storm-craft gets us here. Even.'

'Not quite,' said Henricos, ignoring the mortals as they slid, glassy-eyed, to the floor. 'Iron Hands technology is not forbidden.'

They entered a wider corridor, lit red at floor level. The space reeked of blood, and daubed sigils ran glossily down the steel panels. More crew emerged – some accidently, some drawn by the noise. Xa'ven dispatched two with shots from his bolt pistol. Yesugei silenced four more.

'Only because is not fully known,' the Stormseer replied. 'Just what really takes place on Medusa?'

They passed an intersection, and Henricos paused to loose a volley of bolter-rounds down a connecting access-way, plastering it with blood and tattered robes.

'It's not the same,' he growled, swivelling around to finish off a couple of stragglers. By now warning clarions had broken out. 'I hid our signals with machines. Just devices. You tap into proscribed powers.'

'Not proscribed to me.'

As they worked their way closer to the bridge, mortal troops in heavier armour began to arrive, dropping into defensive formations at corridor junctions and laying down waves of projectile fire.

Xa'ven pressed ahead, his armour deflecting the incoming rounds in a whirl of sparks. 'Brothers, this isn't really the time,' he said, lumbering into hammer-range.

Henricos pushed to join him, taking glancing blows to his battleplate. 'You might be right,' he grunted, working his bolter methodically.

Yesugei came along in their wake, covered by the steady presence of the Salamanders around him. The corridors echoed with bolter-fire. The Word Bearers human troops were stubborn and committed, but no match for power-armoured opponents. They died in their dozens, clogging the walkways.

None of them ran. None screamed for mercy. They fought on, hopelessly. They were just like their masters had been.

They truly believe in this, thought Yesugei, watching more of them thrown clear by Xa'ven's expert blows. *This is now their cause.*

One of the mortals broke through Henricos's assault then and ran at the White Scars legionary. He carried a lasgun and his face was fixed rigid with determination.

Yesugei regarded him for a moment before swatting him aside, barely watching as the man's body slammed into the wall and his weapon clanged to the deck. It was depressing to witness such fervour.

'Take ship swiftly,' he voxed to the rest of the makeshift squad. 'Go fast. No honour in this fight.'

Torghun made his way steadily through the *Starspear*'s lower reaches. The ambient grind of the warp engines thrummed around him. The ship was travelling fast – wherever the Khagan was taking the Legion, it was with his habitual speed.

Torghun passed a few menials on the way down. They bowed and hurried on, barely looking at him.

He reached the designated location and drew up to the slide-door.

He paused for a moment. As he lifted his finger to the entry-rune, a faint chill passed through him, momentarily, like a fever-shiver.

He depressed the rune with a soft click.

'*State nature of business,*' came Nozan's voice.

'I can't say,' said Torghun.

He heard the faint whirr of a vox-detector confirming his identity, and the door slid back.

Nozan wore his cowl. Behind him the chamber was dark and flickering, as though lit by candles.

'It has been a while,' said Nozan.

'And always a pleasure,' said Torghun, pushing past him.

The chamber beyond was fuller than usual. More than forty figures stood in a loose circle, each wearing a cowl and long robes. The light was low, almost theatrically so.

Torghun took his place. Something shimmered at the centre of the circle, like air displaced by a thruster afterburn. He couldn't focus on it. Every time he tried, his eyes slid away from it. None of the others seemed to be making the attempt, so he gave up.

'Brothers,' came a voice from the far side of the circle. Torghun recognised Hibou's accent. 'The lodge is expanded. Members from across the fleet have joined us. For those new to this, welcome. The circle will keep expanding, faster now that matters are in motion.'

Torghun listened carefully. He still didn't know what this was about. Lodge gatherings were normally small affairs, confined to a single ship. Perhaps this demonstrated that things were finally coming to a head.

Secrecy, secrecy. Surely the need for it would dissipate soon.

'It is difficult to do this while in the warp,' Hibou went on. 'Though not as difficult as on Chondax, and we can all be glad to be rid of that world.'

A few gruff chuckles. Torghun had to work not to peek under the shadow of the cowls around him. Why were they all still concealed?

'Now that the Khagan has taken us into the void, opportunities arise – ones we have been waiting for for a long time. Try to look at the light. For those new to it, trust me, it does become easier.'

Torghun's eyes flicked back to the circle's centre. He narrowed his gaze, concentrating hard.

For a moment, all he saw was a faint tremor of movement – trembles, vibrations. Then something clarified: a column, less than a metre tall, hazy at the edges. It was translucent, almost transparent, but definitely there, like a pillar of glass, or maybe water, held rigid before them.

It remained hard to look at. Torghun felt his eyes sting and blinked away tears. A dim sense of nausea stirred in his stomach, accompanied by the awareness, somehow, of tremendous power boiling away close by.

'What is this, brother?' came a voice from halfway around the ring of bodies. Torghun didn't recognise the speaker, but the tone was much as his would have been, had he spoken himself: uneasy, suspicious.

'Calm yourself,' said Hibou. 'The nausea is normal. It fades. This is no different to the art of the zadyin arga.'

Torghun kept watching. Once he had started, it was hard to pull his eyes away.

Slowly, shapes emerged at the heart of the glass pillar. He caught a glimpse of something long and sinuous, curling around an invisible axis like a flame.

Then, more clearly, words emerged: Khorchin script, glowing a dull silver, hanging in the body of the pillar and refracted as though underwater. Torghun traced the meaning as the letters flickered in and out of existence.

Your course is known. Your destination is known. A meeting will be possible. Until then, work as you have been doing. Do not force matters. The Warmaster is aware. He approves.

Torghun felt his hearts beating fast. At the mention of the Warmaster, the pulse picked up a little more.

Hibou stepped into the circle, his face mostly hidden by his cowl. 'What of the Alpha Legion? We were not warned of that.'

For a while, the pillar remained empty. Then, slowly, more words emerged.

It is difficult. We do not have that information. Alpharius is…

There was a pause.

…unpredictable.

'Any instructions, then?'

You have them. Your course is known. Your destination is known. The meeting will take place. Until then, stay faithful. The truth will become apparent.

'Is it not already apparent?' asked another cowled figure. Torghun didn't recognise that voice either. It was hard, clipped, heavily Chogorian. 'Things are finally revealed. We could reveal ourselves too. There is nothing to be ashamed of. I have nothing to be ashamed of.'

Again, a long pause. Then the glass pillar glowed with movement again.

I understand. No, you have everything to be proud of. But the Warmaster arranges this for a reason. Treachery is in all places. No Legion is free of it, not even his. The Imperium's fate depends on it. Your Legion's fate depends on it.

What was producing the words? It almost had the character of cogitator spiel, churning out platitudes, though some of the phrases were clearly answers to questions. Torghun watched the lines of text as they spiralled and danced in the pillar, his eyes stinging a little less the more he read.

Trust to this – your Khan is as noble as he is powerful. He will see the cause for what it is. He will be shown the truths of Nikaea and the truths of Davin. We have every confidence. We have every confidence because of you all. Stay true.

The glass pillar began to ripple out of existence. The air around it closed in, swamping the fragile silver script. Torghun narrowed his eyes, trying to make out what remained.

For enlightenment. Freedom from tyranny. Fraternity. The last words were almost illegible. *For the*

Imperium of Man.

Then it flickered out. Torghun breathed in deeply, suddenly aware of how hard he had been concentrating. His skin prickled; a line of sweat ran down the small of his back.

No one spoke for a while. Then the lights rose in intensity. When Torghun blinked, he saw reverse-colour impressions of the pillar on his retinas.

'What was that?' asked one of the gathering.

Hibou pushed his cowl back. 'That is the nature of them, brother. Cryptic. Unfortunate, but necessary.'

Others, following Hibou's lead, removed their cowls. One of the speakers, the one with the hard Chogorian accent, kept his on.

'If we were to try less opaque forms of communication, we would be discovered,' said Hibou. 'The star-speakers rely on riddles themselves. Why should this be any different?'

'What is it, then?' asked one of the brothers. Torghun knew him – Xo Hutan, of the Brotherhood of the Hunter's Star.

'A conduit,' said Hibou. 'A way of speaking to those we will join.'

'They are already calling the Warmaster a traitor.'

'And you know, Hutan, that this cannot be.' Hibou turned to the others. 'Horus is the only one who ever treated the Khagan with the respect he is due. If we are forced to choose between a tyrant and a liberator, what would a true son of Chogoris do?'

Low mutters of approval ran around the gathering.

'The Warhawk will see it,' Hibou went on. 'He will see the truth, just as we have done, when the time is right, and we are charged to deliver it.'

Nozan nodded enthusiastically. 'The time is right.'

'For what?' asked Torghun. His growing sense of unease had not abated. He looked around the chamber at forty pairs of eyes. 'For whispering around weather-magic?' He glared at Hibou. 'We do nothing but talk.'

Hibou smiled. 'For now. The Legion is not yet ready for more, brother.' He turned to the rest. 'I know you chafe at this, but believe me, words are more important than you know. Keep speaking to those who can be made to understand. Speak quietly, go carefully, so that our number will spread. Some will never be persuaded – we have been warned of this. If the other khans order their brotherhoods to silence us I wish for a hundred of their warriors to already be our allies. Harmony will prevail. That is the outcome we should aim for. The Legion will be set on its course, and the Khagan will see that we have taken the honourable path.'

Hibou glanced back at Torghun, warning in his eyes. 'In the end, he must choose. All we are doing is easing his decision.'

'I did not Ascend in order to talk,' said Torghun, disliking Hibou's sanctimony. 'I joined to fight.'

'Do you really think you will not?'

For a moment the two of them held one another's gaze. Eventually, Torghun lowered his. He didn't even know why he was arguing. Something about the ritual bothered him, and made him irritable. His skin still prickled, as though static rippled across it.

'So, that is all,' said Hibou, addressing the rest. 'We will convene whenever we may before we reach our destination. Until then, stay in communion. Keep the fire burning.'

He bowed, and the assembled lodge bowed in turn. One by one, talking amongst themselves, they broke away from the circle. Platters of food emerged from somewhere – slivers of grilled meats and *cha-tazen* pickles. The lodge meeting took on its more usual character and a hum of earnest conversation broke out.

Torghun saw Nozan heading towards him and slipped away, hoping to avoid talking to either him

or Hibou. As he made his way towards a pitcher of something smelling alcoholic, a figure blocked his path. It was the Chogorian, the one who had kept his cowl up.

'You don't have to stay hidden here, brother,' said Torghun. 'Not if you don't wish to.'

'You are Torghun.'

Torghun raised an eyebrow. 'And you are direct.'

The Chogorian pulled back the cowl. When he saw who it was, Torghun could not hide the faintest twitch of shock.

'I am told you know Shiban, of the Brotherhood of the Storm,' said Hasik Noyan-Khan. His tanned, scarred face looked like weather-hardened leather.

Torghun nodded, swallowing his surprise. 'We fought together on Chondax.'

'He gave me this.' Hasik handed him a lodge medal.

Torghun held it up to the light. It looked very much like the one he had been given, years ago. 'He's a member?'

'Not at all. He found it on Phemus.'

Torghun looked up into Hasik's steady gaze. 'Forgive me–'

'You want to know, what does this have to do with you?' asked Hasik, placing a hand on Torghun's shoulder and guiding him to the wine pitchers. 'I like Shiban, he is one of the best in my ordu. But things are moving fast now and he has already made some noise, and I would like to stop that.'

Torghun eyed him uncertainly. 'What happened on Phemus?'

'Nothing of our doing, to my knowledge. The Snakes, perhaps? But here is the important thing.' Hasik leaned closer, and Torghun saw how deep his scar had been cut. 'I do not wish to see him harmed. Perhaps he can be talked to. Like Hibou recommends. When the choice is made, I wish to see him on the right side of the argument.'

Torghun thought on that. 'I don't know,' he said. 'We didn't see eye to eye on everything. He's Chogorian, and I'm–'

'You are a White Scars legionary. You are a warrior of Jaghatai. This is all that matters.' Hasik fixed him with his penetrating stare. It was hard not to be overawed by his manner. He was one of the few who had been there from the start, who had fought with the Khagan centuries ago. 'Do this for me, Torghun. I will arrange it. Speak to him. I think he will listen. Those who fight together – they share a bond.'

'And if he cannot be persuaded?'

'He will be open to reason. I was.'

Hasik poured a glass of wine from the pitcher and handed it to him. Then he poured one for himself.

'A long time ago, the Khagan told me the only enemy we had to fear was decadence. Each time he slit an emperor's throat on Chogoris I saw him whisper the lesson to himself. Never rest. Never grow fat. Never sit on a throne, for it will become your coffin. When he told me that, I saw it was true, and I loved him more than ever, for I saw how ardently he believed it.'

He took a sip, then smiled at Torghun.

'We do this for our souls,' he said, and not a shred of doubt existed in his warrior's face. 'When the time comes, you will make him understand.'

'You know what they talk of, all across the Crusade?' Sanguinius had asked.

Ullanor's steel-grey atmosphere had hung behind the Angel, making his rubescent armour shine all the more strongly. The primarch lived up to his moniker, and his flawless face had glowed with honest amusement.

It was not long after Horus's investiture and the parade grounds still swarmed with listless

warriors. It would take weeks just to arrange the landers to convey them all to the fleet in orbit above.

In the terrace overlooking the main processional, silken awnings sheltered four primarchs from the worst of the kicked-up engine grime. There you could forget, if you tried, about the billions of soldiers all trying to find their way off-world at the same time. The Khan, sitting with his brothers, wondered idly who had been given the thankless task of orchestrating it.

'Tell me,' said Mortarion, though the Khan could see that he was not really interested. The Death Lord had cut an isolated figure during the celebrations, uneasy in all but his own company. In that respect, the Khan had some sympathy with him.

Sanguinius leaned back in his throne, dangling a golden goblet casually in one hand. 'They place wagers on which one of us would win in single combat. There are odds. I have seen them.'

Mortarion snorted. Fulgrim, the fourth of the gathering, laughed.

'That has been settled, has it not? Our brother Horus wins them all.'

Fulgrim and the Angel looked similar in some ways. They had the same sculptural faces, the same flamboyant armour. Where Sanguinius looked as though he had been born wearing gold-rimmed pauldrons, though, the Khan had always thought Fulgrim looked to be trying a little too hard. In the end, he guessed that Sanguinius would have been happy to cast off his trappings; Fulgrim gave the impression that he would rather die.

'That would seem to be our father's view,' said Sanguinius. 'It won't stop the common man making wagers.'

Mortarion shook his pale head, and the tubes running from his archaic rebreather jangled against one another. 'Stupid.'

Fulgrim gave him an amused look. 'Oh? Why is that?'

'Because we were made for different fights,' growled the Death Lord. His filtered voice never seemed to shift from a sullen register. 'Come to Barbarus, peacock, and see how long your feathers last in the smog.'

Fulgrim's silver eyebrows rose. 'Perhaps I might, brother.'

'I would not recommend it,' said Sanguinius. 'I have seen those chem-clouds. I suspect he would stand them longer than you, Fulgrim.'

'Some of us had it easier than others,' Mortarion muttered.

Fulgrim looked archly at Sanguinius. An awkward silence fell.

'You should not regret that,' said the Khan. The other three turned, as if surprised that he had a voice. 'The hardship.'

Mortarion glared at him sourly. His pallid flesh almost matched Ullanor's overcast, humid skies. 'I don't regret it,' he said. 'I could regret that only *some* of us gained our father's favour, though. I could regret that.'

Sanguinius took a sip of wine from his glass, serenely unconcerned. 'Brother, you should be pleased for Horus.'

'Why?' Mortarion's expression was pinched. 'Because he was found first? Had the longest to work with his Legion? If it had been you on Cthonia, if it had been me, *we* might have been in his place, now.'

Fulgrim sniffed. 'Speak for yourself. Being Warmaster is not the only accolade.'

Sanguinius laughed. 'No more talk of your palatine aquila, brother. You will only make him more jealous.'

'I'm not jealous – not of Horus, nor of you,' scowled Mortarion, missing the humour in Sanguinius's voice. 'You don't understand the problem.'

Fulgrim leaned forward, clasping his long hands together. 'Which is?'

'While He was leading us,' said Mortarion, 'we fought to gain even a glance or gesture from Him.

That was acceptable, for none of us are His rival. Nothing in the galaxy is *His* rival. Now we will fight to gain a glance from Horus, but Horus is not the architect of this. He is just one of us. It will lead to trouble.'

Fulgrim shot a tolerant glance at Sanguinius. 'He *is* jealous.'

The Khan shook his head. Fulgrim could be irritatingly stupid. 'No, he speaks the truth. It should never have happened.'

Sanguinius looked at the Khan thoughtfully. 'I thought you, of all of us, would feel joy for Horus.'

The Khan shrugged. 'He is the best of us, I begrudge him nothing, and I have told him so. But it should never have happened.'

'So should it have been you?' asked Fulgrim acerbically. Mortarion snorted again, but Sanguinius said nothing.

'I wouldn't have taken it,' said the Khan.

'Of course you would have,' said Fulgrim.

The Khan shook his head. 'I have no use for another title. My people give me enough.'

Sanguinius smiled. 'My brother, I think you are the most inscrutable of us all. I know what Rogal wants, and I know what Roboute wants, but even after so long I have no idea what *you* want.'

'He wants to be left alone,' said Fulgrim. 'To shoot off into the stars and hunt down xenos on those delightful jetbikes. They're devilishly fast. I heard from a contact on Mars, Jaghatai, that you do strange things to your ships.'

The Khan shot him a heavy-lidded stare. 'I heard you do strange things to your warriors.'

Fulgrim's slender face briefly flared with anger, but Sanguinius laughed.

'I wonder which one of *you* would win in a duel,' the Angel mused. 'I would like to see that. You both handle a blade like gods.'

'Name the place, brother,' Fulgrim said to the Khan. 'I'd even travel to Chogoris, if you built a palace to keep the dust from my armour.'

The Khan felt the insult. It stabbed at him, deeply, but his expression never changed. They could never know, none of them, how much their closed fraternity rankled him.

'You would lose,' said the Khan.

Fulgrim grinned, but there was something fragile in it. 'Oh?'

'You would lose because you would treat it like a game, like you treat everything, and I would not. You would lose because you know nothing of me, and I know everything of you because you shout it from the turrets of your battle cruisers. My prowess remains unknown. You have some reputation as a swordsman, brother, but I make no boast when I tell you I would leave you choking on it.'

Fulgrim's cheeks flushed. For a moment, he looked like he would go for his blade. As ever, Sanguinius's calm smile soothed the moment.

'Now I regret bringing this up,' he sighed. 'In the cause of peace, shall we put this stupidity behind us? We are not at war, and never likely to be, and that is truly a blessing.'

'Who'd have thought it?' said Mortarion to the Khan, a shrewd glint in his rheumy eyes. 'You do have your pride.'

'As do you.'

'Then what would be the wager on us, brother?' asked Mortarion. 'What would you pay, if we fought?'

The Khan sighed. 'No. I grow tired of–'

'Tell me,' Mortarion insisted. 'Or do you only consider the odds with sword-dancers?'

The Khan stared back at him. As he did so, he realised that, of all his seventeen brothers, Mortarion was the only one who, like him, had remained on the utter margins during the Great Crusade. Even Alpharius had played more of a role at the centre. The Death Lord was as mysterious to him as the

warp.

Intriguing.

'I don't know,' he said, truthfully enough. 'It would be interesting to find out.'

Mortarion laughed then, but what could be seen of his expression was crooked. His whole face seemed arranged for dourness, as if levity risked cracking it.

'That it would,' he said. 'But we have nothing to fight over, you and I, so breathe easy.'

'No?' asked Sanguinius, seriously this time. 'Not even the Librarius?'

The crooked smile faded. 'That's different.'

The Angel took another sip of wine. 'How so?'

'You've not heard the news, then. Our father has taken the matter in hand. I know you take your creation seriously, but you must know it couldn't be suffered to go on.'

Fulgrim looked intrigued. 'What do you mean, taken in hand?'

'There will be a reckoning.' The Death Lord shot a wry glance at the Khan, as though revelling in some secret knowledge that would become public very soon. 'I'll be there, when it happens. I hope you will be there too. Some fights are too important to be left to advocates.'

'Your mind is not on this, lord.'

The Khan stirred himself. He had no idea where the memory had come from. Ullanor impinged on his thoughts ever more frequently. It was becoming a problem.

He bowed in apology to Ilya, who sat opposite him. The candles were burning low, and the Go board was half-populated with a straggling, inconclusive game.

'No, it is not,' he admitted.

Ilya reached for her glass. 'We can play some other time. I'm getting better, though, don't you think?'

The Khan rolled his shoulders absently. They were tight, and needed movement to loosen them.

'You are learning.'

Ilya sat back in her seat. 'Qin Xa told me where we're going.'

'Did he?'

'He also wanted to know if the White Scars were typical.'

'In what way?'

'Legion cohesion. Singular deployment.'

The Khan scratched the back of his neck. 'Chondax did that to us. I'd rather have let the khans follow their own course.'

'You could have done.'

'Not anymore.' He reached for his own drink and took a swig. Fermented aduu milk. Not a popular choice, even in his own Legion.

Ilya looked at him seriously. 'Lord, do you remember when I met you?'

The Khan nodded.

'Horus was there too,' she said. 'I don't know if you were expecting him. If so, it was unkind not to warn me.' That had been the last time they had spoken before the veil had fallen. 'I remember how you were, the two of you, so I understand a little of the decision.'

The Khan raised an eyebrow. 'Do you?'

'Maybe not. But I did think you were like brothers. I can see how you might not want to believe… Well, that…'

The words dried up. The Khan watched her struggle for a while.

'This is not about emotion, szu,' he said. 'If Horus has committed crimes then I will hunt him, just as I would Russ or Alpharius.'

‘We have orders from Terra,’ said Ilya, getting to the heart of it. ‘If things are unclear, surely we follow those first.’

The Khan took another sip of milk. ‘Do you have family?’

‘None living. I had a brother.’

‘Suppose you received notice of a dispute between your father and your brother. Suppose you could not verify which one was in the right. Suppose you had a… difficult relationship with your father. You had to choose. Would it be right, if nothing else were known, for you to side with one or the other? Do they not both have a claim on your loyalty?’

Ilya’s grey eyes did not flicker. ‘What is difficult about the relationship with the father?’

The Khan paused. ‘You share different beliefs.’

‘Significant ones?’

‘Over the destiny of mankind.’

‘That is fairly significant.’

‘Yes.’

Ilya shrugged. ‘Terra is where my loyalty is. I swore oaths to the Departmento. For you, this is about strife within the family. For me, it is about where the orders come from.’

‘Orders are not important,’ the Khan said. ‘Oaths, on the other hand, are. We shall see who has been keeping theirs.’

‘Why? What do you hope to find on Prospero?’

‘I hope to find my brother.’

‘And if the rumours are true?’

‘Then at least I will know who to believe.’

Ilya hesitated. ‘But what do you think?’

For the moment the Khan said nothing. The outcome of the game on the board before him was still unclear – it could go either way. Some strategies were yet to play out, including the one he had launched at the very beginning.

‘I would know if Magnus had died. It would take a lot to convince me he was gone.’

He finally reached for a token and placed it on the grid. It didn’t change much.

‘But we shall be there soon,’ he said. ‘Then the answers will come.’

THIRTEEN

What you become
At speed
Laugh when you are killing

The Word Bearers ship took a long time to subdue. None of the crew laid down to be taken prisoner – they just kept fighting until the end. When their lascarbines and autoguns gave out, they reached for curved knives. When those blunted, they clawed with their hands and teeth.

There was something particularly pathetic about watching a mortal try to dent ceramite with fingernails. Their fingers would shred almost instantly, leaving nothing on the armour's surface but long stains.

For Xa'ven it had been a monotonous task, cleansing that ship. He had none of Henricos's fury to drive him, just his old dedication to performing his duty diligently. He looked into the faces of those whom he had killed and saw ruined lives behind their eyes. Even as his bolter kicked or his gauntlets ripped, he wondered what must have taken place to fuel such zeal.

Hundreds died before the end. The bridge levels were cleansed first, after which the long purge down to the bilges began. Servitors, who would work on no matter who was in charge, were left alone. Senior mortal officers were taken alive and handed to Henricos, who fitted them with cortical dampeners. After that they were acquiescent enough, though the slack expressions on their faces were unsettling.

After Henricos had taken control of the *Vorkaudar*'s drive system, they blasted clear of the outpost on Miirl and back out into the void. The rendezvous with the *Hesiod* and the *Sickle Moon* passed off smoothly – the three ships made their way into the trackless depths and hung silently, invisible to all but the most powerful long-range augurs.

It would have been good to head back into the warp straight away, but the Stormseer needed answers. That, after all, was why they had waylaid the *Vorkaudar* in the first place.

So Xa'ven stood with Yesugei and Henricos in the bowels of the Word Bearers vessel. The vast chamber around them was perfectly circular, a vertical shaft that soared far above their heads. Words ran around the walls in unbroken screeds of flowing runes. Xa'ven could not read what they said. He doubted many could.

The light around them was lambent and uncomfortable, and it had no obvious source. Obsidian-black walls flickered as though licked by tongues of flame.

'What makes this different to the others?' asked Xa'ven.

'It's the biggest,' said Henricos. 'That makes it the most powerful.'

Yesugei nodded. His expression was bleak. 'I can sense it.'

Xa'ven stared at the object of their attention. A giant machine rose up before them, over twenty metres high and more than thirty across. Its surfaces were covered in oily conduits and pipework. Grilles glowed with lurid shades – green, orange, blood-red. It hummed and growled, sending plumes of smoke spiralling up the shaft above, and organic splatters of dark liquid stained every opening. The floor around it was covered in bones. Whenever Xa'ven moved, he crushed another one.

'Can you access?' asked Yesugei.

Henricos looked up at the machine. Xa'ven could hear the whirr of his ocular implants running

scans.

'Maybe,' he grunted. 'Give me time. I don't understand a lot of it. They've bastardised some of the units with things I don't recognise. Is that… Sweet soul of iron. That's blood. They're cooling it with blood.'

Xa'ven winced. It was hard to comprehend just what had happened to Lorgar's Legion. 'How long will you need?' he asked.

Henricos turned to him and laughed harshly. 'A few days? A lifetime?'

Yesugei placed a reassuring hand on the legionary's shoulder. 'Do what you can, brother. I am grateful.'

Henricos almost recoiled from Yesugei's touch before relaxing. He was still tightly wound: putting the Iron Hands legionary in charge of a mechanical task was a good idea. It would keep his analytical mind busy, preventing him from brooding on other matters.

Xa'ven turned to Yesugei. 'Then, must we?'

Yesugei nodded. 'Lead on.'

The two of them left Henricos alone in the circular shaft and made their way along the bloody, stinking corridors outside.

'Never suspected… *this*,' said Yesugei as they walked, gazing around him at the filth scrawled on the walls. 'You?'

Xa'ven shook his head. 'I served with them once. Years ago. Good fighters, but I never liked them.'

'Thought Salamanders liked everyone.'

Xa'ven chuckled. 'Too pious for me. And their primarch. I should not be disrespectful, but…'

They started to climb, back up into levels where the lighting worked more reliably. Mortal serfs in rebreathers and wearing White Scars livery saluted as they passed.

'Perhaps we should have asked more questions,' said Yesugei.

'Well, now is the time to start.'

'I fear so.'

They reached their destination: a pair of heavy blast-doors, riveted and multi-panelled. Twelve guards stood outside them, each in carapace armour and carrying a blunt-muzzled lascarbine. They saluted as the two Space Marines approached, and the doors' hydraulics wheezed into life.

The chamber on the far side was tiny, just a few metres in diameter. The walls were covered in white ceramic tiles, and a harsh strip-lumen hung from the ceiling. A vertical metal frame stood in the centre, onto which was shackled a Word Bearers legionary. Adamantium bands pinned him at the wrists, ankles, neck and lower torso. He was out of his armour, wearing a harsh smock that reached his knees. Snatches of ritual script had been tattooed into his flesh, running down from his neck to his feet.

He glared poisonously at them as they entered. The doors shut, sealing the three of them inside the chamber. For a few heartbeats they stood looking at one another.

'Well?' croaked the legionary, and a line of thick blood ran down from his broken lips.

'Your name,' said Yesugei.

'Take it from my mind.'

'If I could, do you think I ask you?'

The legionary smiled. 'Ledak. Two Hundred and Fifty-Sixth Company. Yesa Takdar.'

Xa'ven leaned against the wall. Every chamber on the *Vorkaudar* smelled disgusting, like long mouldered organs, but these small rooms were the worst.

'What was your mission?' he asked.

'Ledak. Two Hundred and Fifty-Sixth Company. Yesa Takdar.'

Yesugei sighed. 'We have ship. You are far from help. Talk, and we keep you alive.'

Ledak kept smiling. Xa'ven noticed that his teeth had been filed to points. That must have taken hours.

'Do you not want to live, Ledak?' he asked.

Ledak kept smiling.

'What was your mission? What was your heading?'

'Ledak. Two Hundred and Fifty-Sixth Company. Yesa Takdar.'

Xa'ven pushed himself from the wall and drew closer. 'Why not unburden yourself, brother?' he sighed wearily, looking directly at the legionary's bloodshot eyes. 'Ever since Isstvan it has been nothing but running, or fighting. I'd like to know *why* before I do any more of it.'

Ledak stared back. For a moment it looked like he wanted to speak. His face shone with energy, like a preacher about to explain the secret of salvation to a potential convert.

Then the light went out. Ledak shook his head, bumping up against the metal rods on either side of his temples.

'Ledak. Two Hundred and Fifty-Sixth Company. Yesa Takdar.'

Yesugei grabbed him by the throat, pushing the slabbed cheeks up and forcing blood vessels to the surface. '*Speak.*'

Xa'ven drew in a long breath. The whole business made him feel soiled. He had just about grown used to killing his erstwhile kinsmen in the heat of battle. To see one so close, wretched and vulnerable – that was different.

'Can you not do something with his mind?' Xa'ven asked Yesugei.

Yesugei, still clutching Ledak's throat, shook his head. 'Does not work like that.'

'But the other one, on the station–'

'He was not prepared. It was deception, and a weak one.' Yesugei looked at Ledak darkly. 'Ahzek could do it. I have not his art.'

Ledak managed to leer back, somehow, with his face half crushed by Yesugei's gauntlet. A glint of victory shone in his eyes.

Yesugei pulled his fist back then, letting Ledak's head fall forward, and punched him hard, breaking his nose. Blood spotted across the tiles, and Ledak reeled groggily. Yesugei punched him again, and Xa'ven heard the crack of more bone fracturing.

'Is this necessary?' Xa'ven asked, glancing uncertainly at Yesugei. Ledak was a traitor and a killer, but still one of the Legiones Astartes. The Salamanders had never stooped to this, even with xenos, and a Word Bearers legionary was far closer to home.

'We have no time, Xa'ven,' said Yesugei. The Stormseer's lined face gave away his own unease, but there was steel in his golden eyes. 'We come here for information, not for another ship. He will know fleet movements, plans. You have better idea?'

Xa'ven looked back at Ledak. The legionary was smiling still, though his filed teeth were black with blood.

Yesugei withdrew his fist and clasped his gauntlets together. A pearl of electric-blue light kindled between his fingers. He opened his palms and lightning leapt from his hands to Ledak's face. Crackling spears lodged fast, jutting into Ledak's eyes and sparking across his exposed skin.

The smell of crisping flesh filled the chamber. Ledak screamed, writhing in his bonds, spasming and jerking. Yesugei kept up the pressure for a few seconds, pouring on more pain, letting the lightning dance across the legionary's body, before halting abruptly.

Ledak slumped, breathing hard. He looked disorientated. A large chunk of his left cheek had burned away, exposing the sinews beneath. Wisps of smoke rose from his body.

'Do not do that again,' said Xa'ven.

'Fleet movements,' Yesugei told Ledak. 'Communications. These things can save you.'

Ledak's face hung forwards. He looked to be having trouble focusing. He blearily stared at Yesugei, then Xa'ven.

'Le… dak. Two… Fifty-Sixth… Comp–'

Yesugei unleashed more lightning. The screaming was wet and gargling this time, hampered by a throat that was being burned away. It seemed to go on for longer.

That was enough. Xa'ven drew his bolt pistol and trained it on Yesugei.

'No more, brother,' he said quietly.

Yesugei turned, shocked. The lightning died out, and Ledak's charred face slumped again.

'You draw your weapon?' asked Yesugei, incredulous.

'Do not make me use it.'

The White Scars legionary hesitated, as if wondering how many enemies he truly had in the chamber. 'We have no time. They know deployments. We need to know.'

Xa'ven nodded. 'We will discover them. Henricos is working on the machine.'

'You think they would not do this to us?'

'That is my point, brother.' Xa'ven held the pistol steady. 'You have seen what is on this ship. You have seen what they have become. You were as disgusted as me.'

Yesugei shook his head in frustration. 'We need to *know*. Cannot fight without information. Cannot locate Legion.'

'I agreed to join you,' said Xa'ven steadily. 'I will fight with you to find your Khan. I will die to do it, if it takes the war to the enemy. But we both have our primarchs' example, and when I see him again I will not look Vulkan in the eye and tell him I forgot my vows.'

For a moment, Yesugei looked defiant, as desperate as a cornered animal. The thirst for knowledge, for more speed, burned in his every gesture.

Ledak coughed then, choking up blood and bile. His face was ruined, a mess of muscle and raw fluids. If he had been a mortal such wounds would have undoubtedly killed him.

Yesugei looked at his handiwork, and the fervour left his face. He lowered his gauntlets. His golden eyes betrayed a brief sense of horror, as though he were seeing the contents of the room for the first time.

'You shame me,' he said. 'For a moment–'

Xa'ven holstered his weapon. 'I have lived with it for longer, that is all. At the start, I too would have done it and not cared.' He looked at Ledak's open sores. 'Become like your enemy, though, and he has your soul.'

'Something Vulkan said?'

'It is something he might have done.'

Yesugei drew in a deep breath. He looked tired. Xa'ven guessed that expending his power on the station and during the aetheric teleportation had drained him badly.

'We need to know,' Yesugei insisted.

Xa'ven pressed the rune to open the doors. 'We will, weather-maker.'

'Time is against us,' said Yesugei.

'Trust in Henricos,' said Xa'ven, ushering him from the chamber. 'I have learned to. Iron Hands are a strange breed, but, believe me, they never give up.'

He glanced back at the prisoner hanging from the shackles.

'We all have that in common still, at least.'

The jetbike tore down the tunnel, roaring like a living thing. Shiban drove it hard, tilting over in the saddle to avoid the obstacles as they rushed to meet him. The space around him was tight – just a few metres wide in the sharpest sections – and spiteful with lethal polyps of metalwork.

The machine shuddered beneath him. The drives thundered, the exhausts flamed. A bulkhead swept up out of the dark and he angled hard. A crossways strut followed it and he ducked low.

The proving ring on the *Tchin-Zar* was five kilometres long: over two kilometres on the straights, sandwiched between a pair of fearsome hairpin corners. It was little more than a void between enginarium zones, left empty by a Legion that valued its fast-attack speeders. Mastering a jetbike required hours in the saddle, and the skill could be forgotten, so the battleships maintained training circuits in their depths.

Shiban leaned forward, adjusting his weight fractionally, tipping the nose to avoid a tangle of piping before gunning the power to pull clear again. Iron-dark engineering elements blurred past. He might have been speeding through the heart of some forgotten metallic world.

The bike responded well. It was the last of those that had borne him on Chondax, and the refitters had done a good job of dragging the dust from its filters and cleaning the blood from the ploughshare fairing.

It took him a while to catch the sound of his pursuer. Down in the proving tunnels it was hard to hear much over the echoing growl of his own steed.

Shiban smiled, and depressed the throttle. Locator runes sped by on his helm display – flickering outlines of red against a blurred backdrop of raw black. He saw the signal trailing him, a few hundred metres back but closing.

Try harder.

The end-course switchback approached at speed. Shiban hurtled into it, refusing to brake until the very last moment. The jetbike chassis quivered, barely containing the enormous power booming from the drives.

Only when the corner-apex surged into visual range did Shiban jab on the air brakes. The inertia threw his body forwards; he felt the blood rush to his head. A heavy metal beam straddled the way ahead and he rolled to one side to slide under it. Beyond that, the tunnel pulled sharply left, twisting hard round under the foundations of immense engine housings. For the first time he heard the hammering of combustion other than his bike's – the grind of fusion reactors blazing away far above.

In a second he was round, skidding tightly through the confined airspace before kicking the engines into full burn again.

He had nearly taken it too fast. The jetbike's compensators whined at full pitch; the right flank grazed the tunnel's inner wall, sparking in the dark.

He laughed out loud, picking up speed. The noise was exhilarating. He could hear nothing but the resounding beat of engines and smell nothing but exhaust-smog.

He glanced at his helm display.

Still being tailed. Impressive.

Shiban boosted under a skeletal gantry before applying another full burst. A long straight yawned away from him, weaving between the vastness of the battleship's internal structures.

He felt sharp. It had only been a short while since he had been hunting across the lava-plains of Phemus IV. His reactions, honed upon the backs of Chogorian aduun, were as reliable as his glaive.

But he was being caught. The signal behind him grew, looming out of the darkness like a dogged ghost.

He laughed again, and went even faster. The end of the tunnel swept towards him. Even at forty per cent thrust, a jetbike could eat the distance up on a short track with terrifying speed.

I will lose you at the Pincer.

Shiban let the bike slide left a fraction before feeding it more power and skirting a jutting mass of burned-out cargo feeders. He skidded under the pile-driver foundations of a big fuel conduit and lurched wide.

The Pincer shot towards him out of the dark – a narrow aperture formed by two close-knit brace columns. The hole between them was barely three metres wide. That was hard enough to thread under normal conditions. In the dark, hampered by the confinement and extreme speed, it was a pleasingly dangerous test.

Shiban accelerated, concentrating hard as he tore into range. Then his engine kicked, rocked by a stray exhaust discharge, sending him a fraction high.

Shiban jammed on the air brakes, tensing as the Pincer's top section raced towards him.

There was no time to do anything but duck. Ragged ironwork cracked into the top of his helm, nearly stunning him, but he smashed his way through in a shower of sparks.

The tunnel on the far side spun drunkenly, and Shiban had to work hard to control his mount. Gritting his teeth, he pulled the prow up just as it risked crashing into a solid mass of adamantium deck-bracing.

He recovered position, but his speed had taken a hit. He opened the throttle again, only to see his pursuer shoot past overhead. The rider must have come through the Pincer at insanely high speed.

Shiban laughed for a third time, lost in the glorious foolishness of it. That was *riding*. It would not have shamed the Khagan himself.

By then the final corner was approaching fast, and Shiban eased off. The rider ahead of him did the same, and the tunnel filled with the thick smoke of thrusters powering down.

A few seconds later, the whole track flooded with light. Hatches split open above them, hissing from banks of angled pistons, exposing jetbike hangars in the vaults overhead. Shiban continued to decelerate, coasting up to the nearest docking berth. He was still smiling.

The rider ahead of him nudged up into a berth further along. Two segmented claws reached down from the roof-space and grasped his jetbike fore and aft. The rider dismounted before the machine could be hauled up and away to the servicing bays, leaping over to a steel gantry to his right.

Beyond the gantry stretched the main body of the hangar – immense, curving and brightly lit, swarming with servitors and speeder maintenance crews. Other Legion riders strode across the capacious floor space towards their prepared mounts, armoured and ready to descend down to the proving ring themselves.

The claws descended for Shiban's jetbike. He leapt from the saddle as the machine was pulled past the gantry, and strode over to the victor, worried that he would leave before he had the chance to congratulate him.

'Brother!' he cried. 'Fine riding!'

The rider withdrew his helm with a twist and ran a gauntlet over his sweat-glossed forehead. 'You make it hard to beat you, Shiban Khan.'

Only when he spoke did Shiban recognise him: the Terran from Chondax, the one who had fought through the Grinder at his back. He looked unchanged under the hard lumens of the hangar – stocky, tall, his scar faint on his cheek. Shiban had not expected to see him again. In a Legion of so many thousands, Brotherhoods came and went like summer sparrows.

'Torghun Khan,' Shiban said, reaching to clasp him by the hand, surprised but not displeased. 'How are you here?'

Torghun shrugged. 'The fortunes of war,' he said. 'You will share a drink with me?'

Shiban hesitated. He had no idea why – it was good to see Torghun again.

'With pleasure,' he said, smiling. 'Lead on.'

'So what happened for you after the White World?'

Torghun looked equivocal. 'There was work to do in the canyons. We hadn't cleared them out. Not all of them.' He smiled ruefully. 'Or it hadn't been done properly.'

Shiban smiled. ‘Really?’

They sat at a table in one of the *Tchin-Zar*’s many refectory chambers. This one was reserved for legionaries, and was empty save for the two of them. Even the White Scars, who were not as slavishly devoted to duty as some Legions, took refreshment only sparsely between the demands of combat conditioning.

Torghun swilled his drink in its metal cup. ‘They recruited a Terran woman after that. She has the ear of the Khagan, I’m told. There was some reorganisation.’

‘Did you see fighting again?’

‘No. Not after the last of the hain were rooted out.’

‘Ah. Sorry.’

‘It’ll come again.’

Shiban tried not to study Torghun too obviously. He looked no different. For some reason, the Grinder campaign remained vivid in his memory even when so many other exercises had faded. It had felt then like the ending of something old and the beginning of something new. Only now was the shape of that novelty becoming more apparent.

‘Did it change things as you hoped it would?’ asked Torghun.

‘How do you mean?’

‘Being there, at the end, with the primarch.’

Shiban thought. ‘I do not know. We were ordered to Phemus. We barely had time for our death rites. Do you remember Hasi?’

‘I do. He died?’

Shiban nodded. ‘And Batu. Only Jochi came with me.’

Torghun cradled his cup in two hands. ‘You took many casualties. That’s the price of speed.’

Shiban smiled ruefully. ‘As you warned me.’

Torghun looked instantly apologetic. ‘I did not mean–’

‘I know.’ Shiban took a sip of his drink. ‘I thought about what you told me on Chondax.’ He caught Torghun’s sceptical expression. ‘Believe me, I did. I have become an exponent of what you said. Your warriors were more flexible than mine. I have tried to teach them these things.’

Torghun raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m surprised.’

‘Do not be. The galaxy is changing.

‘That it is.’ Torghun stared at his drink, still taking none of it. ‘And what do you make of it?’

That was the question. ‘What do you wish me to say?’

‘You’re the poet,’ said Torghun. ‘You have words for everything.’

Shiban’s eyes flickered up for an instant, scanning for mockery. He had never been able to tell, not with Torghun. ‘I trust the Khagan,’ he said. ‘But you knew that already. He will understand more than we do.’

Torghun smiled wryly. ‘He could share the knowledge a little more.’

‘He will, in time. I am content to wait.’

Torghun pushed back in his chair, and the reinforced metal struts flexed under his armoured weight. ‘I admit, it was enjoyable to see the Alpha Legion scatter like that.’ His mouth creased at the corners. ‘Slippery bastards. I wonder what they thought when they saw the *Swordstorm* coming at them.’

Shiban shared the smile. ‘They would not have had much time to think.’

Torghun laughed. ‘True.’

A silence fell between them. The clink and slam of menials working nearby intruded, echoing in from a capacious serving area. The floor trembled as a flight of jetbikes thundered underneath them, just a few decks down.

Torghun spoke again, finally. ‘Shiban, what is happening?’

‘I do not know.’

‘No one does. You know we’ve been ordered back to Terra?’

‘I do.’

‘And they’re saying Russ has finally gone rogue?’

‘Not only him.’

Torghun pushed his chair back. ‘I wanted to see you, because you always said that it couldn’t last. I remember you did.’

Shiban did not remember saying that. ‘Everything changes.’

‘Lines are being drawn. Every time we consult star-speakers they give us a different riddle, but it’ll come out soon. Someone is lying.’ He looked carefully at Shiban. ‘And it’s in the Legion, too. I begin to suspect…’

Shiban’s brow furrowed. ‘Say it. You came here to do so.’

Torghun leaned forward. ‘Brotherhood. That’s the tie that binds us. I saw it in the Luna Wolves. They had groups. Informal groups. They would meet, renew warrior vows. It was tolerated. The Warmaster, they told me, fostered them.’

Shiban listened. ‘The Warmaster?’

‘So they said. It’s a good system. It breaks down ranks. Information is exchanged. It helps with trust.’

‘You are in one of these?’

Torghun nodded. ‘There’s nothing sinister. It’s a fraternity. You must have had them on Chogoris – warrior lodges.’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘Well, Chogorians are in them. They outnumber us now. That’s the way things are going, right?’

Shiban didn’t smile. He felt like he was being manoeuvred, and that made him tense. ‘You were part of this on Chondax?’

‘I dip in and out. Have done for a few years. Some have been involved for much longer. But, look, it’s nothing serious. I was just reminded of what you’d said, and I thought you might be interested. We’re all warriors. Some of the finest in the Legion are members. You’d be welcome. I could speak for you.’

Shiban took another sip. ‘I have my Brotherhood.’

‘Of course. As do I. It doesn’t replace that.’

‘Then what is the point?’

Torghun looked nonchalant. ‘Like I said, to talk. To share fellowship. Sometimes it’s good to forget about being a khan and just be a…’

‘Brother.’

‘Exactly.’

Shiban nodded slowly. ‘So, this is why you came to find me?’

‘I heard you were on the ship. It seemed like an opportunity.’

Shiban pursed his lips. ‘You ride a bike fast. I do not remember you riding that fast.’

Torghun snorted. ‘I had to, to catch you. You came close to taking your head off.’

‘They are built for speed. It would be a shame to waste it.’

‘It’s not all about speed.’

‘Yes, so you keep telling me.’

Torghun pushed his cup to one side. ‘It’s an offer, that’s all. You know as well as I do that choices are going to have to be made. The Warmaster’s sent his request for assistance.’

‘As has Dorn.’

‘Yes, after being silent for… how long? When did Terra last seek us out?’

Shiban felt incredulous. ‘You’re Terran, brother.’

‘I’m Legiones Astartes,’ said Torghun, firmly. ‘I haven’t set eyes on the Throneworld in a hundred years. This is about what’s right.’

Shiban looked at him steadily. ‘The Khagan will decide. We could wait for that.’

‘Yes. Yes, of course he will. When, though?’ Torghun placed both hands on the table before him, and forced a smile. ‘I should learn patience. I know I should. Consider it a failing.’

Shiban kept watching him. Everything he had told Torghun was true: he *had* learned from him. He did respect his way of war. The lack of direction from the primarch was disconcerting, almost as much as the inexplicable presence of the Alpha Legion had been.

Torghun reached down and withdrew a casket from his belt. ‘It’s nothing much, but these count as badges of inclusion.’ He opened the casket and tipped a silver medallion out into his hand.

Shiban kept his surprise hidden. Just as before, on Phemus and afterwards, he did not like the look of it. Despite the moon-device and lightning sigil, it did not look Chogorian. Chogorians were not silversmiths; when they worked metal, it was bronze or iron.

‘I have seen one of these before,’ he said quietly.

Torghun toyed with the medal. He seemed unwilling to let it go entirely. ‘I’m surprised. As a general rule, they’re kept hidden.’

‘Yet you show me yours.’

‘Yes, because you’re a candidate.’ Torghun closed his gauntlet over the medal and replaced it in its casket. ‘You’d get one yourself.’ He smiled self-consciously. ‘Just a token, nothing more.’

Shiban watched the way Torghun’s fist closed tight, and somehow doubted that. ‘I have heard of these lodges.’

‘Of course.’

‘I did not stand for any of it in my Brotherhood. I thought the Legion was enough, and I have a token already.’ He gestured to his scar, which, in the Chogorian manner, was deeper and whiter than Torghun’s. ‘That is not hidden.’

Torghun bowed. ‘I take your point.’

Shiban sighed then. Torghun was not a skilled deceiver – perhaps that was something to draw comfort from. ‘Hasik sent you.’

Torghun raised an eyebrow. ‘That obvious?’

‘I went to him about a discovery I made on Phemus. Now you turn up showing me the same thing.’

Torghun spread his hands apart in a gesture of resignation. ‘This isn’t a conspiracy, Shiban. Is it not reassuring, that the noyan-khan is a part of this? He was there at the beginning.’

Shiban thought of Yesugei then. The zadyin arga had been there at the start too. Where was he? Shiban, like many others, missed his quiet presence at the heart of the Legion. It was no coincidence that matters had drifted in his absence.

‘Does the Khagan know?’ Shiban asked.

‘About Hasik? That’s between them, I’d say.’

‘No, I would not say. If the Khagan knows, that changes everything.’

‘I don’t know, Shiban. I’m not really that senior, I’m just one of many.’ Torghun looked evasive. ‘But I would guess he does. Not much gets past him, I’d think.’

Shiban pushed back from the table. He felt fatigued from the ride, and needed to cleanse his mind with meditation. ‘I said it could not last, did I?’

Torghun nodded.

‘Perhaps it cannot. Everything is fluid. For the first time I can remember, we have no direction. We have nothing to hunt that we can see.’

Torghun let him speak. Shiban didn't really know where the words came from. 'You have not convinced me,' he said. 'I do not trust the lodges, but we fought together. You came back for me at the Grinder – do you remember? – and I do not forget. So I will come. I have tried to open my mind. This may be a part of that.'

Torghun looked genuinely grateful. 'Good. That's all I ask. If you don't approve, it's just between you and me, and I don't talk.'

'Will they not know me?'

'We wear… hoods,' said Torghun, looking a little shamefaced. 'All rather theatrical, but it helps, at the beginning. No one need know you.'

'I see.'

'I'm glad, Shiban. Truly I am. This, the whole thing, it is about the warrior spirit. I know you have it. I've witnessed it.'

'You may again,' said Shiban dryly.

Torghun grinned. He looked relieved. 'It would be an honour.'

FOURTEEN

Machine-spirit
When everything changed
Burned world

Henricos reached for the component, stretching down into the machine's innards. Not for the first time he regretted the intimate connection he had established with his armour. It was hard to remove almost all of it now, and it made him bulkier than he'd have liked. The instruments implanted into his pauldrons and breastplate had been helpful in jamming the augur sweeps on the outpost, but their size made it difficult to delve fully into the heart of the device. He had clambered halfway down a narrow cleft between two massive chunks of whirring metal and now felt as though he had been buried alive.

He blink-activated a sensor-frond and a sliver of metal extended from his right gauntlet. He probed again, inserting the sensor into a silver-sheathed input node and trying to understand what emerged.

The Word Bearers had done something very strange to their machines.

They no longer output binaric derivatives, but seemed to operate on a base-four internal mechanic, the reason for which eluded him completely. Some components had remained relatively standard – others had been replaced with much less efficient counterparts that made use of leather cam belts, iron cogs or even organic parts. Devotional script had been engraved everywhere, overwriting any useful markings that might once have adorned the housings.

Henricos shunted the frond-output to his helm buffers. Numbers scrolled past, glowing softly on the interior curve of his lenses. Not for the first time, he felt like smashing the whole thing.

It is a corruption. They have befouled what they were given.

Slowly, painfully, he began to piece together the principal parts of the internal workings. Some functions would take weeks of work to reconstruct, but he had isolated a cartographic projection capability amidst all the esoterica. Performing stellar mapping was notoriously difficult, so even the Word Bearers had not ripped out *that* equipment in favour of their own crazed constructions.

Stretching as far as his arm would let him, he pushed a binaric reader into a slot buried near the base of the cleft and activated it from his armour's own power-source. More data scrolled down his helm-feed, and he smiled grimly.

'Got you,' he growled to himself, then pushed back up to his feet, scraping the edges of the machine as he extracted himself.

Even touching the traitors' equipment made him feel soiled. Henricos remained thankful he had not had to take off his gauntlets and expose his remaining flesh to the sullied material. Then again, it was becoming hard for him to contemplate removing his gauntlets for any reason. The sight of his bionic left hand reminded him of Ferrus's injunctions, and that reminded him of Isstvan, and that sent him into the black mood that only *killing* seemed capable of stirring him out of.

It was different for Xa'ven. He at least had the hope of finding his primarch and rebuilding his Legion. Henricos had seen the pict-feeds from the battlefield, routed over a hundred grainy lenses and streamed to every Iron Hands vessel in the system.

Ferrus was gone. The immortal had proved mortal, the eternal had been ended.

After that, there was nothing but rage – a howling, anguished rage that drove out reason. The fighting had remained horrific. The enemy had not stopped coming at them, wave after wave, fuelled by their early victory.

Survival, after that, had been just another curse. It would have been better to die fighting, and it was only blind chance that had kept him alive.

If he had not encountered Xa'ven, that chance would never have come. There were times in the depths of sleepless nights when Henricos hated him for that. There were other times when he admired him more than any other warrior he had ever met. It was Xa'ven who had guided them out into the void, steering the survivors clear with his calm, steady determination. Xa'ven had kept his head when even his fellow Salamanders were screaming for suicidal vengeance. He was a fine example of his gene-father's idiosyncratic creed.

In another universe, Henricos might have been proud to follow Vulkan. His sons were admirable in almost every respect. But there were no other universes, and his loyalty to Ferrus would never die, not until his own soul was extinguished in combat, even though he knew that this would happen soon enough.

Never forget. Never forgive.

He broke free of the machine, stumbling as he negotiated the heaps of cables that snaked around its base. The circular wall of the shaft loomed up over him, vast and dark.

Henricos knelt down and activated the power units he had placed around the device. Energies snaked and spat down the power lines, rekindling the blooms of colour behind its plasma grilles. A throaty rattle kicked off somewhere in the thing's interior, sending coughs of smoke through the organ-like exhausts.

For a moment after that, nothing much happened. Blood gurgled through the coolant tubes, energy arcs lashed between bronze electrodes on the upper housing.

Then, slowly, the chamber began to fill with light. Henricos took a step back, carefully checking the rad-levels. Above him, a swirling pattern of luminous plasma began to take shape. He stared at it, unable to read the pattern. The writing on the walls glowed brightly, fed by the power of the machine in their midst.

Then, with a realisation that made him feel thick-headed for not spotting it earlier, he realised what it was doing.

'Xa'ven,' he voxed, backing away further and gazing up into the shaft. 'I think you'd better come and see this.'

Yesugei woke on the *Sickle Moon* just as he had woken every cycle since leaving Chogoris – with his face lathered in sweat, his hearts pumping.

The last remnants of the dream still lingered. They were identical each time: a planet of embers, the Khan fighting a nameless, faceless shadow. Yesugei always woke at the same instant.

When the Khan fell.

The Khan had never met an enemy that he had not bested. Perhaps Ferrus hadn't either, before he faced Fulgrim. The rumour had always persisted, fuelled by whispers of past atrocities, that only a primarch could kill another primarch. Perhaps it was even true.

Yesugei uncoiled his hands from his lap. He had been sitting in the position for meditation, hoping that the old ways would ease the trouble in his mind. It had not worked.

The experience with Ledak had shaken him. He knew that he would have kept going with the storm-lightning if Xa'ven hadn't stopped him. He would have kept going until the flesh had been dripping from the Word Bearer's face and his screams were choked with raw blood.

Never before had he lost control like that. Killing was one thing – they had been bred to do that – but inflicting pain… That had been consigned to the barbarism before Unity.

The entrance chime sounded softly. Yesugei got to his feet and walked over to the basin set into the walls of the cell. As he did so, the door slid open.

‘A good time?’ asked Xa’ven, standing in the hatchway.

‘As good as any.’

The Salamanders legionary entered, ducking slightly. ‘The same dream?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you see any more?’

‘No. Just same. If you have ideas…’

Xa’ven smiled ruefully. ‘Sounds like Nocturne. Other than that, no.’

Yesugei rubbed water on his face, scouring the sweat from the skin. ‘About Ledak–’

‘I understand, believe me. We need to decide whether he is too dangerous to live.’

‘What do you think?’

‘For now, no. He might still be useful.’

Yesugei reached for a rough towel. ‘But you did not come to talk about Ledak.’

‘Henricos has discovered something.’

‘Ah.’ Yesugei donned his cloak, draping the ivory fabric over his devotional robes. The touch was cool against his flesh. ‘Good news?’

‘You will have to tell me,’ said Xa’ven.

They took a shuttle between the two warships. The *Sickle Moon* had tech-crews crawling all over it, repairing damage sustained during the warp jump. The *Hesiod* hung in the distance, a dark grey slab that reflected little light. The *Vorkaudar* was in the best condition of all of them, though the Word Bearers had done their best to defile its once-proud lines, and its long prow had been covered in glyphs, making it look almost like a xenos craft.

‘So, you were going to speak to me of Nikaea,’ said Xa’ven.

Yesugei looked away from the viewports. ‘I was.’

Xa’ven sat easily in the crew berth, hands resting upon his knees, and waited.

Yesugei drew in a long breath. ‘What you know already?’

‘Only that the Edict came in swiftly. Vulkan enacted it straight away. By the time news of Isstvan III reached us, we had no active Librarians in the Legion.’

Yesugei shook his head in disbelief. ‘What did you do with them?’

Xa’ven shrugged. ‘They took vows. They re-entered the ranks. I don’t know how many survived the massacre. Maybe none did.’

‘And you never think, just once, this is madness? You never think you throw away your strength?’

‘Some of us did. I remember arguments.’ Xa’ven looked down at his gauntlets. ‘But it was an order, direct from the Emperor. We are a loyal Legion.’

‘Hope others were less loyal. Can’t imagine Wolves giving up their priests.’

Xa’ven snorted in agreement. ‘Russ was there, though.’

‘On Nikaea? Don’t know. Not openly. He and Valdor were close, though, and whole place was crawling with Custodians.’ Yesugei leaned back against the crew berth wall, remembering. ‘At the time I thought it was real contest. The arena was full. You would have liked it, Xa’ven – volcano world, air thick with ash. Millions had come. Audience was huge, truly huge. Looked like whole Imperial Palace had travelled to be there.’

Xa’ven listened. Yesugei did not like to remember it too closely, but kept speaking anyway. As his lips moved, the images crowded back into his mind.

‘I was never meant to be there,’ he said. ‘Should have been the Khan. He discussed it with the others.’

‘Others?’

‘Magnus, mainly. Sanguinius as well. They were the three. Magnus was figurehead, most powerful,

but he was not only voice. Sanguinius was always subtle. In some ways, I think he is closest to the aether. On this, though, the Khan always argued same way. He drew up most of rules for Librarius, even though his name was never in datacores.'

Xa'ven looked sceptical. 'This was never known.'

'No,' smiled Yesugei. 'Of course not. It is as I told you – Magnus never wanted Librarius. He wants every psyker to unlock his full potential. *Explore it all*, he says. No restraint, no guidance. They had *tutelaries* fluttering in their ears and speaking to them – though we did not see it. It was dangerous. It needed to be curbed, so the Khan and the Angel both created structure. They limit what psykers can do. On Chogoris, we call it the Path of Heaven. Stray from it, we tell them, and the warp will eat your soul.'

'So you knew it was dangerous.'

'Of course! What is not dangerous? Your Promethean Creed is dangerous. Being alive in universe is dangerous. We balance on narrow ledge. There were those who thought we are witches, ripe for burning, and those who thought we are gods. Neither could be allowed to win argument.'

'But they did. The witch-hunters won.'

Yesugei nodded. 'For days afterward, I thought mistake had been made that would be corrected. By the time we knew it was permanent, Legions were already reforming. So quick! You would think we were always eager to throw away our power.'

'How did it happen?'

'I spoke,' said Yesugei sadly, remembering. 'Awkward. It was in Gothic, and so I did not do well. Some oppression settled on me from somewhere. Magnus spoke too. He did what we feared – he went too far. He never understands how much fear he caused. If he stood up and said "We know we must reform, we know we must be careful," then we might have won. But no, he preaches about knowledge and power and gives impression he is prophet. When I hear him speak, that is when I began to worry.'

'Who spoke against?'

'A Space Wolf priest. That was strange. I suspect he is there for some other purpose, but maybe not. One that spoke longest was Mortarion. He filled amphitheatre with poison.'

'Mortarion. I didn't know he was even there.'

'Had not expected it to be him. I thought Russ might stand up, or maybe Angron. No, it was Death Lord. He had been on Ullanor too, casting shadow over everything. He has dark soul, and nothing he did on Nikaea changed my view.'

Xa'ven thought on that for a while. 'I find it strange that his argument prevailed.'

Yesugei nodded. 'You and I both. I told Ahriman we would weep for this, and so it was. If any ask, if all not lost in days to come, who killed Librarius, the name is Mortarion. He did it.' Even now, the memory exasperated him. 'Should never have been left to Thousand Sons – the Khan should have been there, standing with the Angel and Magnus. No one could accuse him of being sorcerer. It would have calmed the others, to see warrior-primarch making case.'

'So why did he not go?'

'Horus ordered him away.' Yesugei stared at the floor, reflecting upon how little he had known. 'To Chondax, just as Nikaea was preparing. We talked, he and I. He considered rejecting – he could have done – but we both thought Chondax would be over in weeks. Was only greenskins, after all.' He gave Xa'ven a rueful look. 'Only greenskins.'

'So Horus ordered it,' repeated Xa'ven. 'Interesting.'

'I had no idea then,' said Yesugei bitterly. 'No clue. Truly do not believe Horus was corrupted while on Ullanor – would have sensed something. If someone wished the Khan not to be on Nikaea, it was not him.'

'Who, then?'

‘Who knows? Why was Chondax veiled for so long? Why is galaxy still locked in warp storms? Why does Emperor’s light falter and star-speakers’ visions fail? These are questions. A mind has been at work here, and for long time.’

Xa’ven looked up. The shuttle was gliding towards the *Vorkaudar*’s docking bay. ‘They did not succeed in everything,’ he said. ‘Some of us are still alive.’

‘Does your optimism ever end, just for moment?’

Xa’ven smiled. ‘Optimism? That is not what I would call it.’

The *Vorkaudar*’s flanks enveloped them, throwing shadows over the viewports. Yesugei felt the soft *clunk* of docking rods extending. ‘What you call it, then?’

Xa’ven got to his feet, ready to activate the crew berth doors.

‘Faith,’ he said, quite seriously.

The *Swordstorm* broke free of the warp on the system’s outer limits and immediately powered up the sub-warp drives. As it thrust clear of the jump-point and into real space, more ships of the fleet ripped into existence in its wake. The curve of the void’s edge shook as it was pierced, throwing coronae of multi-hued light spilling out into the dark. Every vessel crashed into the realm of senses at speed, spearing into existence and powering up to full velocity.

The Khan stood upon the *Swordstorm*’s observation balcony, fists clenched, staring at the forward oculus viewscreens. In the bridge’s tiered levels around and below him, servitors and mortal crew hurried silently to bring the ship’s systems online and run forward augur sweeps.

Qin Xa stood next to the primarch, flanked by armoured members of the keshig. None of them spoke, none of them moved. Data streamed in, glowing in rune-patterns on crystal lenses.

‘Ship signatures,’ said the primarch softly. ‘Quickly.’

From far below, the telltale whine of lances powering up could be heard. The *Swordstorm*’s decks shuddered as the sub-warp drives reached maximal velocity. Void shields rippled across the forward viewers even as the warp shutters clanged open and the Geller field fell away.

‘Nothing in range, lord,’ came Jian-Tzu’s voice over the bridge-vox.

‘No signals on augur sweep,’ confirmed the sensorium master, a dour and efficient Chogorian called Taban.

‘And the planet?’ demanded the Khan. He was adorned in his full battleplate with its pearl-white ceramite and gold trim. His dao blade hung from his side, the scabbard encrusted with rune-studded leather. He felt battle-tense.

‘Will be in range imminently.’

Tech-priests in the sensorium pits chattered and swayed in their long red robes, slotting mechadendrites in and out of feeder nodes.

Qin Xa’s eyes narrowed as he studied the incoming data. The only signals on the proximity spheres bore White Scars markers, fanning out into a battle spread in the *Swordstorm*’s wake.

‘Nothing,’ he said softly. ‘No transports. No energy-trails.’

The Khan nodded. A major system like Prospero ought to have had thousands of ship-spores hanging in the void, the chemical residue of void engine release, but the routes inbound from the Mandeville point were sterile. Unease spiked in his stomach, and he quelled it.

I will see it with my own eyes. Until then, no judgements.

The planet swam into extreme forward sensor range. Blurry pict-feeds flickered into life, clarifying rapidly as servitors adjusted the image gain logic engines.

‘It’s black,’ said Qin Xa.

‘I see that,’ said the Khan.

Prospero had once been a jewel of a world, a pale-blue orb the colour of a Terran dawn, banded

with lilac and under-lit by glistening ice caps. From space it had been pristine, untouched by the industrial hyper-sprawl that had turned the Throneworld into a grey-tinged ball of rockcrete and iron.

Now it was mottled the colour of burned charcoal.

As the images picked up definition, the Khan saw vast swirls of drifting cloud, as thick and dark as those that had swept across Ullanor.

His fists clenched the balcony railing. 'Any signals?'

'None, lord.'

The Khan felt anger swell up within him. He had been right to come.

'Bring us into orbit,' he ordered coldly. 'Instruct the fleet to blockade, then prepare for planetfall. Maintain the sweep and broaden. If you detect anything with a Fenrisian marker…'

Even then, he hesitated for a moment.

'Kill it,' he growled.

'It's black,' said Ilya, staring hard at the viewer.

Halji did not reply. He looked grim.

'Seriously, Halji, the whole world's black. I've seen slate records of Prospero and it was beautiful. What could do that to a planet?'

'A Legion,' said Halji. 'A Legion could do that.'

Ilya felt sick. 'How many people lived there?'

'You are our woman for numbers, szu.'

Ilya probably could have dredged the figures up from somewhere, and knew that she did not want to. Prospero had not been a death world like Barbarus, with a few hardship-maddened inhabitants clinging to their hellish lives. It had been civilised, urbane, paradisiacal.

It must have been billions.

Billions.

Her throat tightened with anger. 'They will be punished. If this was one of ours, they must be punished.'

'They will be, if it is in his power.'

'We have to know, Halji.' Ilya rounded on him. 'We have to know who did it.'

'We already do.'

'I will not believe that. Could... could xenos have penetrated this far?'

Halji shook his head. His usual cheerfulness had gone. 'What xenos? They're all dead or dying. Nothing remains that could harm us.'

With a shock of recognition, Ilya remembered saying exactly the same thing, back when she had first met the Khan in orbit over Ullanor.

Nothing remains that could harm us, the Khan had replied. *I wonder, Yesugei, how many times, and in how many forgotten empires, those words have been spoken.*

It all seemed horribly prescient. She turned back to the viewport, and saw that hateful, chem-scorched orb hanging in space like a grave marker.

'There's nothing for us here,' she said, her voice shaking. 'We should never have come.'

'He had to come.'

'Then we should go soon. Back. Somewhere, anywhere but here.'

Halji rested his immense hand upon her shoulder. 'Calm yourself. The answers will be on the surface.'

She drew in a shuddering breath, and reached out for the sill of the viewport. 'I'm not going down there.'

'You do not have to, but the Khagan will rely on you. Fleet needs ordering. We already receive

orders for deployment.'

Ilya did not want to hear that. For once, she wished that they would just get on with it for themselves. For once, she felt as old as the chronos told her she was.

'Route them to my station,' she said, absently, unable to tear her eyes from the portal.

'It will be done.'

'Ensure, if you can, that the blockade is in *ch'ang*-pattern.'

'It will be done.'

'How will this end, Halji?'

The warrior looked back at her, with no hint of a smile on his hide-brown, white-scarred face.

'Szu, this is just beginning,' he said.

By the time the *Swordstorm* reached geostationary orbit over Tizca, there was no longer room for doubt. Atmospheric readings streamed in, adding to the visual evidence, and Taban's tally made for grim listening.

'Substantial tectonic activity, lord,' Taban said, looking fixedly at his data-slate. 'Atmospheric pollution levels far in excess of mortal tolerances. A result, we surmise, of heavy bombardment consistent with mass drivers from orbit, followed by secondary trauma.'

'Secondary trauma?' asked the Khan. 'Which is?'

'Unknown. We are working on it. Background radiation levels are high, but there are other… things. Cloud cover at one hundred per cent, formed largely of particulates from earlier destructive phase. Acidic residue. Toxins across a wide spectrum present in lethal quantities, and extensive volcanism across equatorial zone.'

The Khan flexed his arms. It was hard to know how to feel. For some reason he wasn't angry – more numb. He kept expecting some grand illusion to be unveiled. Magnus might have been capable of it. If anyone could hide the true state of an entire planet, he could.

'Life signs?'

Taban shook his head. 'Impossible to read.'

'Then we go down.'

'We cannot, my lord.'

The Khan glared at him. '*Cannot*,' he repeated, infusing the word with contempt. As if such a thing would ever deter a primarch.

Taban swallowed. 'There is a barrier. Something in the upper atmosphere – an aetheric field, a truly massive one. We have already run the simulations. Landers will not survive it, nor drop-pods.'

The Khan shook his head. 'Impossible. There must be a way.'

'The world is dying, lord. The phenomenon is still growing, perhaps a result of what happened here. One does not kill an entire planet without aftershocks.'

The Khan looked over to Qin Xa, who stood waiting for orders. He had said nothing throughout the exchange. 'Thoughts, Xa?'

Qin Xa lifted his head. 'There is an obstacle in the troposphere,' he said thoughtfully. 'What of below?'

'Hard to say,' replied Taban. 'We get almost nothing from the surface.'

'But the field is confined to the upper atmosphere?'

'It is.'

Qin Xa glanced over at a hexagonal area towards the rear of the bridge. Eighteen pillars of pure adamantium enclosed an obsidian floor, each one carved with a Chogorian rune of warding. The Khan followed his gaze, saw what he proposed and nodded with approval.

'Excellent, Xa,' he said.

The sensorium master made a final effort to dissuade them. ‘It will be unstable,’ he protested. ‘We may not be able to extract you, or even make vox-contact.’

‘I have every confidence in you,’ the Khan said calmly, before turning to the keshig. ‘Ready?’

Qin Xa nodded. ‘On your command.’

The Khan reached for his ornate, gold-crested helm. The faceplate was decorated with a Qo-era dragon mask in florid curls. ‘Let us go.’

The twelve Terminators stomped from the observation balcony.

‘What of the fleet?’ Qin Xa asked, his helm already donned.

‘Hasik can handle a blockade. Transmit him the authority signal. And tell him to consult Ilya – we brought her in for these things.’

Qin Xa bowed, and the Khan heard the faint click of his helm-vox switching channels.

Taban hurried after him. ‘The air is toxic, even to one blessed with your particular gifts, lord. Please do not remove your helm.’

The Khan nodded perfunctorily, taking his place at the centre of the translation grid. ‘Thank you for your concern.’

‘The terrain around the city is volatile. At the first sign of activity–’

‘You will wait for my order,’ said the Khan coolly, watching as Qin Xa joined the others.

Taban bowed. ‘Some readings were… anomalous. Would a weather-maker–’

‘Generate a locus for the heart of the city,’ ordered the Khan, ignoring the sensorium master and speaking directly to the teleportation operators.

‘It is done, lord.’

‘Activate translation.’

Taban withdrew, as did the rest of the crew still within a few metres of the teleportation platform. A force field crackled into life across the pillars, hemming in the hexagonal space between them. The bridge disappeared behind a curtain of writhing static.

A second later, it was gone.

A chill raced through the Khan’s body, just as it always did. For a fraction of a heartbeat, he had the half-awareness of being suspended over the chasm of infinity. The sensation had always been oddly reassuring, as if that were where he truly belonged.

Then the lights ripped away. He felt solid earth under his boots and real air filtering through his facemask. Even mediated by his armour, it tasted foul.

His keshig stood about him. Qin Xa stood at his shoulder. They all drew weapons – flamers, disruptor-shrouded blades, combi-bolters.

The Khan kept his sword sheathed.

Ahead of him, a scene of devastation stretched away under a darkened sky. Slivers of lighting licked against the horizon, while thunder cracked and growled in the far distance. A tangle of steel struts and crumbling rockcrete extended off in every direction. Towering frames of inferno-hollowed structures loomed up against the dull skies like skeletons. Dust drifted across what remained, heaping in grey dunes like sand. It all glinted faintly in the gloom.

The Khan knelt down and scooped some dust up in his gauntlet. Tiny shards of glass ran through his fingers. Far above, the boiling clouds scudded in an unbroken layer.

The keshig moved off, going slowly, their boots crunching through the residue. The low grind of their battleplate matched the tenor of the planet.

The Khan looked over to his left. The remnants of a vast pyramid still stood amidst the ruins, its flanks broken open and its carcass thick with grime. An immense battle-engine, a Warhound-class Titan, lay in the rubble, prone upon its back with its armour blistered and blackened. It looked as though it had been thrown down and torched.

Everything smelled of burned metal. The whole city reeked of it. The Khan's armour sensors told him that the surfaces around him were still warm from the afterglow of whatever apocalypse had overtaken Prospero.

Qin Xa, just a few metres away, turned to face him.

'Where first, Khagan?' he asked.

The Khan got back to his feet and let the glass-dust rain to the ground.

It had all gone. All of the libraries, the repositories, the arcana. If the Space Wolves had truly done this, then perhaps their power did match their boasts.

'There were caves,' he said. 'He told me of them. Under the city.'

He drew in a deep, filtered breath, heedless of the ash-taint that remained on the air.

'We start there.'

FIFTEEN

Cartography
City of the dead
Yaksha

The first thing Yesugei noticed as he entered the vault chamber was the light. It was everywhere, dancing across the obsidian and reflecting from the antennae of the machine. Lines of brilliant electric force snaked and snapped before spiralling up into the huge empty space above.

Henricos spread his arms wide as Yesugei and Xa'ven entered. 'Impressive, no?'

The three of them stood in the shadow of the device and gazed up at the projected illumination. An immense galactic swirl shimmered above them, thirty metres across, picked out in gold points. The collection rippled and flickered as the machine's power units thundered away.

'A stellar hololith,' said Xa'ven, sounding disappointed.

'A damned big one,' replied Henricos, affronted. 'You know how much power this is drawing?'

Yesugei wandered to the machine's edge. A series of brass spheres hung from a spiked iron frame, all crackling with black lightning. 'What are these?'

'No idea.' Henricos stomped over to join him. 'Thought you might be able to tell me.'

'I am not tech-smith.'

'No, I know, but it's not machinery. Not any that I recognise, at any rate.' Henricos held his gauntlet up to the lightning, and it passed through the ceramite effortlessly. 'This stuff is not here. Not physically. It doesn't register on any of my instruments. Still, it's doing something.'

As soon as the Iron Hands legionary spoke, Yesugei saw the truth of it. The lightning was an overspill from something taking place on the far side of the veil. Somewhere, deep inside the machine, warp energy was being channelled.

'Is impossible,' Yesugei said, though the evidence of his inner senses told him otherwise. 'Cannot shackle to a machine.'

Henricos snorted. 'Well, they did. You can see it, I can see it. I was hoping you could unlock it – it's clearly designed to be used.'

Xa'ven joined them. Waves of light played across his green armour, glistening over ink-black helm lenses. 'I would not recommend it.'

Yesugei paused. He could feel the aether boiling away within the machine. The barrier between the worlds was thin, dissipated somehow by the apparatus in front of him. He watched the coolant tubes gurgle, saw the runes glow on the housing and wondered how they had done it.

'All we have is a galactic map,' said Henricos, stalking back across the floor. 'It can do more.'

Xa'ven followed him. 'It is a sorcerous device.'

'I guess it is.'

'I thought you hated those.'

Henricos turned. 'I do. I hate everything about this ship, but you asked me to find out what it was, so I did.'

Yesugei looked up at the shimmering hololith as it gently rotated. The scale of it was impressive enough, but Henricos was right – that was not why it had been made.

'I can reach into it,' he said quietly.

Both Xa'ven and Henricos turned to face him.

‘Safely?’ asked the Salamanders legionary.

‘I do not know.’ Yesugei pressed his palms against the machine, angling his head as though the sounds he sought were physical ones. ‘I can hear… voices. Languages. Just like in warp. What Navigators hear.’ He pressed his gauntlets harder against the metal. ‘Something is alive.’

‘What is it for?’ asked Xa’ven. ‘Can you tell that?’

Yesugei could almost hear what the thing was *thinking*. Fragments of thoughts brushed against his consciousness, as fleeting as sunlight on water.

‘Is communications device,’ he said slowly. ‘I think. Long range, aether-borne.’ He removed his hand, which tingled as it was withdrawn. ‘Like star-speakers, more powerful. Uses warp directly. I think is very old.’

Henricos nodded. ‘It was built before this ship was.’

‘Can it help us?’ Xa’ven sounded doubtful.

‘Yes,’ said Yesugei. ‘It recognises me. I can unfold it.’

Xa’ven moved pensively towards the near wall of the device. Bloody scrawls covered its surface. A rust-brown handprint stood out among the streaks.

‘I do not like the way this feels.’

‘Damn you, then!’ spat Henricos. ‘Why did we take this ship? You want a way through the warp, they’re giving us one. But if you want to throw it–’

‘I understand, Bion,’ said Xa’ven, calmly. ‘I know what we are doing. But is there any other way?’

The Iron Hands legionary shook his head. ‘Nothing else I’ve found. If you don’t want to activate it, then we should leave, scuttle the ship and take our chances in the others. That’s it.’

Xa’ven looked up at the projection again, and stared at it for a long time. Yesugei could tell what he was thinking.

The Word Bearer. That is the other way.

‘Do what you must,’ Xa’ven said eventually, his voice heavy.

Henricos stood back, satisfied. Yesugei examined the brass spheres more closely. Moving slowly, he extended his hand to touch the surface. As he did so, a static tingle ran down his arm.

He closed his eyes. Immediately, the chatter on the edge of his inner hearing grew louder. He heard a cacophony of semi-human voices whispering in his mind. Nothing of what they said made any sense; they were like half-words used by infants or animals. In his mind’s eye, he saw a smoky, congealing miasma boiling at the core of the structure.

Then, swimming up out of the confusion, he saw two runes clarify before him. Both glowed a furious red and their outlines seemed out of focus. Looking directly at them was hard.

He selected the one on the left, reaching out to it with his thoughts. As he did so, the babble hushed a little, and something like a hiss ran through the machine’s innards.

‘Ah,’ Henricos said. ‘Yes, that *is* more useful.’

Yesugei opened his eyes. The galactic map was overlaid with a hugely complex web of moving streams. It looked organic, like the lattice of blood vessels in a body. Worlds were picked out in various luminescent shades, each one marked by runes in a language Yesugei could not understand. The starfield underneath was mottled and rumpled in some areas, but clear in others.

‘Those are warp routes,’ said Henricos enthusiastically. ‘Navigator channels. They must be – that’s the core network.’

Yesugei’s gaze followed the translucent swirls. ‘I agree. And the worlds – that is Terra. That is Colchis.’

The warp conduits meandered and diverged like a silted up river delta. Few led straight, and most terminated in stormy wells.

‘What is growing over Ultramar?’ asked Xa’ven, pointing to a truly massive pattern of storms

running in a single swathe across the galactic south-east.

'They're cut off,' said Henricos.

'If not now, then soon,' agreed Yesugei. 'And not just them. See the barriers around Terra, and Chondax.'

As his gaze rested on the system where the Khan had been sent, he noted how far the interference was clearing. The barriers in the warp there looked strange, almost geometric, as if caused by some algorithm rather than the fluctuations of the aether. Whatever its origin, the system looked to have been completely severed, though now a host of passages were opening up around it.

'So they can see the shape of the warp storms,' said Xa'ven. 'Useful.'

'How many of these machines can there be?' asked Henricos. 'The *Hesiod* doesn't have anything like it. What else can it do?'

Yesugei smiled. Henricos's passion for the mechanical was his most appealing attribute. 'More,' he said, channelling his mind back within the device. He directed his thoughts towards the second rune, and a second mesh of overlays rippled across the galactic hololith. By the time he looked up again, the shapes had solidified into recognisable sigils.

'By the forge…' whispered Xa'ven.

For a moment Yesugei couldn't see what he meant. Then, slowly, the shapes made sense to him. 'Legion icons,' he said.

Henricos nodded. 'Battlegroups. Expeditions. War fleets. Static formations.' He shook his head. 'They know too much.'

They didn't know everything. There were no movements recorded close to Terra, and some Legions, like the Raven Guard and the Night Lords, were completely missing. However, the extent of what they did know was chilling. The Blood Angels trajectory was marked in red – they appeared to have been heading directly for a single system on the extreme eastern edge of the galaxy. The Ultramarines looked to be hemmed in around the margins of their great star empire, and massive formations of Word Bearers and World Eaters were heading through the warp storms directly for them.

'Does Guilliman know this?' breathed Xa'ven, horrified.

Henricos shook his head grimly. 'Doubt it. He'll be as blind as the rest of us.'

The detail was not complete. Some of the sigils glowed only softly, as if the machine were working on incomplete or unreliable information. The display had the look of an ancient manuscript rather than a data-slate ledger – the icons were florid, the symbols mystical. Some were completely indecipherable, others flickered in and out of existence altogether.

Still, it was far more complete than any galactic survey Yesugei had ever seen.

'How are they doing it?' asked Xa'ven.

'No augur-station has the range,' said Henricos.

'Agreed,' said Yesugei. 'They are tapping the warp. Those fleets are deep in the aether, their presence is known to those that dwell there.'

Yesugei looked up at the Chondax sector. It was empty. Warp storms raged in broken fragments around it, the last embers of a long inferno.

'That is not enough,' said Xa'ven quietly. He turned to Yesugei. 'It cannot be. They cannot just *know* these things – if they did, the war would already be over.'

Yesugei nodded, his eyes following a trail out of Chondax. Just on the edge of vision, he thought he caught fragmentary echoes of Chogorian symbolism and focused his mind on it. 'Something else is needed,' he said, distracted.

Henricos snorted. 'Prayers and petitions?'

'Do not mock,' said Yesugei, his eyes following an indirect spinward route. Back towards

Chogoris? Surely not.

Xa'ven moved carefully towards the brass spheres. 'Weather-maker,' the Salamanders legionary said, cautiously. 'Is it wise to keep this active?'

Yesugei heard the hissing again, and immediately snapped his thoughts back into focus. He whirled around and saw the spheres blazing hard with dark energy.

'No, perhaps not,' he said, extending his mind back into the heart of the machine. 'We have seen enough.'

His mind reached back within the device, down to where the symbolic runes glowed in their fog of semi-reality. He moved to shut down the process, and the first of the two sigils sunk into darkness.

The hissing grew. He saw what looked like a pair of eyes swimming up from the miasma. He had seen such eyes before, but only in visions. His hearts began to beat harder.

He reached for the second rune, closing it with his mind, sealing it off as if he were clasping a hand over a candle flame.

It would not disappear. It kept burning away, furious and intense, before rotating slowly and staring back at him.

'Shut it down,' he heard Xa'ven say, though the voice sounded far off.

Yesugei tightened the focus of his mind. The rune remained stubbornly in place. The coils of smoke around it grew in solidity, forming shapes in the half-present murk. A voice emerged from the babble – a single voice, bestial and maddened, raging with the anger of something lashing through layers of inertia to get at its prey.

'Shut it down!' Xa'ven shouted.

Yesugei could not see what was happening in the chamber. His mind sank further into the warp-interface within the machine. A face swooped up out of the morass before him – a long face, high-crowned, bone-ridged, blood-fleshed, a distillation of human nightmares.

It locked eyes with him, and in those eyes were reflected all the pains, all the agonies, all the terrors of a million worlds. Yesugei tried to pull away, and couldn't. The creature had seen him.

Its malevolent eyes narrowed. Its glistening flesh solidified.

And then, with a twitch of cat-like sadism, it smiled.

Death had never held any terror for a son of Chogoris. In the days before the Master of Mankind had come, it had been everywhere – in blood-feuds, honour-killings, on the hunt, from want or exposure or disease. The plains-people took it in their stride, neither complaining of it nor celebrating it. They did not raise mausoleums to the slain, but left the bodies to be eaten away by the winds and carrion-birds.

In that, as in everything else, the Khan had become one with his adoptive home. He had seen a hundred deaths before leaving his unnaturally short youth behind. Adulthood brought more bloodshed, much of it at his hands, and he met it in the same detached fashion. He had never mourned – death was the way of things, the immutable pattern of the universe. It was to be welcomed, for it curtailed sickness, it cut off the vigorous soul before it could become slack, it cleared the ground for new growth.

Even primarchs had died, so it was whispered. Even gods.

For all that, it was difficult to witness what had become of Magnus's iridescent city of glass and crystal. The Khan crunched through layers of grey-silver dust, watching heavy skies scud across the blackened shells of old structures. The lightning never stopped, flickering away on the far northern horizon like dancing cracks into another, stranger reality. Every so often a deep peal of thunder would boom out, the irregular heartbeat of a world in the final throes of its death-agony.

The Khan's keshig fanned out around him. They went as warily as he, and their bone-white armour

made them look like ghosts in the dark. Already the dust of Prospero was clinging to them, tainting them, blotching and marring the white and gold of their battleplate.

The Terminators bore their energy-shrouded blades, glinting pale blue. As they moved, their combi-bolters swept the terrain ahead, whining faintly as targeting reticules half-locked on to half-targets. Everything that remained in Tizca – the place that Magnus had once proudly called the City of Light – was a phantasm.

The Khan stalked at the head of the group, his dao blade held lightly in his right hand. His long fur-lined cloak hung stiffly, stained black where the dust cleaved to it. The way ahead was picked out in the false colours of his helm display, though even that failed to leaven the oppressive sense of utter dark. The cloud cover was so complete that they might have been creeping through the bowels of some colossal hive-spire.

'Something up ahead,' reported one of the keshig Terminators over the squad-vox.

Qin Xa held up a gauntlet to halt the squad. 'Detail.'

The Terminator paused. 'No, nothing,' he reported. 'False positive.'

It had happened many times. The sensors were scrambled, crazed by the heavy rads and static that buzzed through the atmosphere.

The Khan pressed on. He half recognised some of the buildings. They soared up around the creeping armoured figures at their feet – just husks now, coal-black walls with nothing but smouldering rubble within. He had caught sight of old emblems amidst the debris: Imperial iconography, Prosperine eye-devices, stylised homages to ancient knowledge and the esoteric.

'More corpses,' voxed Qin Xa as they passed down the long boulevard leading towards the heart of the ruins.

The Khan had already seen them. Most were mortal skeletons, stripped of skin and muscle by some terrible weaponry. A few items of armour had survived in the dust: domed helms, shoulder guards and boots.

Some of the corpses were much larger. Ceramite lasted longer than carapace-plate, and many crimson armour-pieces remained wholly intact. Most had the XV Legion's sunburst icon picked out in gold or sapphire, slowly eroding as the toxic dust wore at it.

'And this,' said Qin Xa, walking over to a long staff weapon, half-buried in a heap of drifting ash. He pulled it free and shook the detritus from it. 'I have seen these before.'

The Khan had, too. The weapon was golden, heavily encrusted with star-and-moon engravings, and far too large for a mortal to lift, let alone wield. A long, black blade slung under the main shaft had once spat with disruptor-energy; a bolter fixed further back had once cracked from shell-recoil.

'Custodians,' the Khan voxed, stating what the others already knew.

'But whose side were they on?' asked Qin Xa, hopefully.

'You know that, Xa,' said the Khan, pressing on.

He had not wanted to believe it, not truly. His feelings about Russ had always been mixed – respect for the warrior; exasperation at the boasts, the self-appointed exceptionalism. It was another thing, though, to witness what he had done, to see the truth of the star-speakers' testimony. The Khan found that the truth, now that it was before him, was a bitter draught indeed.

His boots kicked against a steel-grey pauldron and it rolled, rattling, away from him. Like everything else it was desiccated, scoured down by the wind. He saw runes on the curve of it, still visible, angular and Fenrisian.

'Nothing,' muttered Qin Xa, following closely. 'Nothing alive.'

His tone made it clear that he saw no purpose in staying. No doubt he was already thinking through the implications of what they had seen, where they would have to go, and whom they would have to fight.

The Khan slowed, listening hard. He blink-clicked his armour's aural filters off and let his enhanced hearing do its work.

For a moment, over the dull hum of the Terminator power units and the faint spit of disruptor-fields, he thought he caught something out of place.

It had been like… buzzing.

'I know where we are,' he said, looking out beyond the shattered sawtooth edges of nearby edifices. Over to the left rose the jagged remains of a pyramid, still hundreds of metres high even in its ruin. A few panes of dust-opaque glass clung to the substructure. Through a gap in the surrounding walls, he saw another highway running almost parallel to the one they now walked. 'Eighty-one radial streets. Ridiculous.'

'Leading where?' asked Qin Xa, a blade in each hand, his helm underlit blue from the field-discharge.

'The cult temples,' said the Khan, pressing on. 'The great pyramids. The Occullum. Everything.'

They passed more of the same – twisted corpses, dried out and decaying. Thunder growled over them all, the lightning bleaching the colour from their livery and rendering them all as grey phantoms in the glass. Ahead of them, the street widened, revealing three Rhino transport chassis slumped amidst the remains of some kind of barricade.

'A stand,' remarked Qin Xa as he pushed coils of razor-wire aside. 'Did them little good.'

A few hundred metres ahead, the street opened up further as other thoroughfares intersected. Like a river reaching its delta, the radial highways converged, merging into a wide square. As they reached its margins, the scale of it became steadily apparent.

The space before them was vast, yawning away under the fulgurate skies like some fire-blackened imitation of the plains of home. Once it must have been paved and well-lit, surrounded by elegant architecture and thronged with crowds. Now only debris remained – armour-shells, the chewed remains of vehicles. Fissures had opened up among the marble flagstones, some wide enough to swallow a man, all as tar-black as the void. A lone pillar stood at the very centre, broken off about fifty metres up. The stone plinth at its base still carried recognisable figures – a robed woman being lifted aloft by a one-eyed, armoured figure.

The Khan walked out across the square, heading for the pillar. The keshig spread out silently in his wake, Qin Xa with them.

As he walked, the ground under his feet felt increasingly fragile, as if it were just a thin skin over nothing. Cracks were everywhere, cobwebbing out from the lips of the fissures like probing fingers. This had been the epicentre of the inferno. Perhaps the crust of the world itself had been compromised.

Then he heard it again – a buzzing, like the drone of massed insect wings.

'Are you getting that?' he asked, halting beneath the long, faint shadow of the pillar.

The keshig was by now dispersed widely, picking their way steadily through the residue.

'No life signs,' voxed Qin Xa carefully. 'No proximity markers.'

His voice gave away his uncertainty. They could all feel it, whatever the armour-readings told them.

The Khan turned back to the cratered and pock-marked pillar. It reared up into Prospero's eternal night, and the mottled sky above raced and boiled.

Then it came again – distinct this time, like the whine of an insect swarm.

The Khan whirled, blade in hand, and he felt the stone flags shifting under him. His armour still registered nothing – no targets, no bodies.

By then the keshig were moving too. They circled, blades and bolters ready, searching for an unseen enemy. One of them opened fire, and the sound of it crashed jarringly.

‘Eyes!’ voxed Qin Xa, suddenly running across the square towards – seemingly – nothing. ‘Disable auto-senses – use your eyes!’

The Khan blink-dismissed the lattice of targeting reticules and environment compensators, and the square sank into the dreary fog of unenhanced vision.

Only then did he see them: shimmering in spectral blue-white, arthropodic, winged and massive. There were dozens, sliding up out of the ground like unquiet shades rising from the grave. They disturbed nothing, not even a fleck of ash. Their rigid outlines glowed with the ghosting phosphorescence of witch-light, though their hearts were as transparent as glass.

They were ruined things, twisted and hunched, though still twice the size of the Terminators before them. They had bulbous roach-like thoraxes and abdomens, tattered gossamer wings and segmented limbs that trailed against the ground. Grotesquely swollen brains, throbbing with an eerie light amid tight cranial folds, burst out from low-slung tangles of mandibles. Once free of the broken earth they swayed through the air jerkily, lurching as though blind and famished.

The Khan gazed at them stonily.

‘*Psychneuein*,’ he said, taking up his blade. ‘So something survived after all.’

Aetheric energy sparked across Yesugei’s armour. ‘Go *back*,’ he commanded, raising a fist.

Deep in the *Vorkaudar*’s warp-interface, the nightmare face rose up, still grinning widely. Yesugei saw rows of needle-teeth, pupil-less eyes of molten iron, an extended claw.

The creature snarled and writhed, rocking back and forth. The miasma around it thinned. The rune remained activated, driving the machine, thinning the barrier between worlds. The power it controlled seemed to be accelerating, ramping up like an overloading drive engine.

Yesugei fixed his mind upon the rune. It spun before his mind’s eye, throbbing like a wound in the fabric of the universe.

‘*Close*,’ he commanded, then again, lapsing into Khorchin. ‘*Yake’en*.’

With a grind like rusty iron being dragged over steel, the rune winked out.

Yesugei opened his eyes, relieved. He turned to look back up at the galactic map.

It had changed. The stars pulled together, dragging into a single clump like a swarm of glowflies. The golden luminescence intensified, burning painfully. The machine’s engines gave out in a series of smoky clangs, but the shimmer kept growing.

Xa’ven drew his hammer, Henricos his bolter.

‘Can you halt it?’ the Salamanders legionary asked, standing his ground while staring at the swirling fog above.

Yesugei took his staff in both hands. The aduu skull at the tip rippled with fingertips of lightning. The whole chamber felt suddenly tight and humid, as if too much air were pressed into too little space.

‘Machine is closed,’ he said.

Henricos backed away. ‘Well, something’s still working.’

The stars drew closer, accelerating into conglomeration and melding hard. A clap like thunder echoed around the vault, cracking the machine’s containment shell and resounding up the shaft above them.

‘Get back!’ warned Yesugei, suddenly realising what was happening.

The lights shuddered out. A sound like a fractured scream echoed from the air around them. What remained of the projected starfield coalesced into an inky clot and fell fast, ripping into corporeality and cracking to the floor. It burst, shattering like an eggshell.

Bursting free of it came a skeletal, long-limbed creature with blood-red skin and long, curving horns. It had the same molten eyes, the same needle teeth. It was bigger than all of them and moved

with a jerky, unreal speed. It pounced across the deck, squatting like some vast and grotesque insect, before leaping right at Xa’ven.

Xa'ven is attacked by a warp-beast on board the Vorkaudar.

Henricos fired first, hitting it with bolts that seemed to glance and whine from its hide. Xa'ven rushed forward, hauling his hammer round to meet it.

'No!' roared Yesugei, too late to drag him back.

The Salamanders legionary sent the hammerhead cracking into the creature's torso. The blow was perfect – it should have ploughed into its ribs, breaking them open and sending the creature sailing, broken-backed, through the air. Instead, Xa'ven was thrown clear of the impact with a sharp crack of displaced energy, his weapon ripped from his grasp. His massive armoured body crunched into the vault wall, denting the stone and showering him with dust.

The creature sprang after him. Its every movement was blurred and splintered, as though recorded on some broken picter-lens. It landed, tearing at his throat, its claws pinning him, its jaws slavering in close and worrying at him like a dog upon its quarry.

Yesugei levelled his staff.

'*Ta qarija!*' he shouted.

Silver lightning, sharp as charged neon, leapt from the staff and smashed into the creature, showering it in a coruscating burst of aether-light and ripping it from Xa'ven's prostrate body.

It shrieked as it flew clear, crashing to the deck again in a tangle of spines and hooves before twisting around to scream at him. For a moment, Yesugei found himself staring directly into its face, and the malice of it chilled his hearts.

He summoned more lightning, hitting the thing again and sending it skidding further across the floor of the vault. Warp energy was the only thing that seemed to hurt it: Henricos kept firing all the while, emptying his magazine into its flesh, but the bolts had no effect.

Xa'ven stayed down, out on his back and gasping wetly for breath. Yesugei went after the creature, and the aether surged through him like a flood, hot and painful.

'Banish!' he roared in Gothic. 'Go back!'

More bolts cracked into the creature's smouldering hide. It raged, skittering on the deck, screaming in pain. Lightning sparked and lashed from its horned and spiked back. Yesugei ramped the intensity up, pouring everything into the attack.

Amidst it all, the creature tensed for another pounce, shouldering up against the deluge of incorporeal spears of light. Its long limbs drew inwards, its spiked shoulders rose, its whip-like tail coiled.

Then it blew apart.

A deafening bang ran around the chamber, followed by an enormous rush of forge-hot air. Fragments of bone and sinew splattered and clinked from the walls, and thick laces of bile slapped across Yesugei's armour. Echoes of the creature's animalistic screeches rebounded for a moment, long, shrill and hateful, before the last slops of otherworldly flesh dropped to the floor.

Henricos stood motionless, his weapon empty, staring at the epicentre of the explosion. For once, he had nothing to say.

Yesugei looked around him warily, half-expecting to see more horrors pouring out of thin air, but the chamber remained empty, marked only by the ticking-down of the great machine and the stink of burning.

'And what,' said Henricos eventually, 'was *that?*'

Yesugei didn't know. He had heard legends of things that swam in the deeps of the warp – sentient

dreams of ancient presences – but never guessed that he would live to witness one. They should not have been able to live and breathe in the material world, any more than he could live in the seething mass of the aether.

Have you ever travelled with Navigator? Seen the things they do?

'We should never have used machine,' Yesugei said, breathing heavily. 'Knew they had fallen. Did not know how far.'

Screaming. Clawing at ship.

Henricos grunted caustically, though the sound was interrupted by Xa'ven's hacking cough. He had not gotten to his feet.

Suddenly anxious, Yesugei hurried over and crouched beside him. 'How bad, brother?'

The Salamander's breastplate was glossy with blood. It pumped out freely from a deep neck wound, fountaining from the seal-gap between helm and gorget. The ceramite was rent, the fine gilt detailing marred by tooth-marks.

Xa'ven's breath came in thick heaves. The blood wasn't clotting. It rushed out of him, splashing across his plate and dripping on the floor.

Yesugei reached for the broken helm seal and prised it open. Henricos came to help, taking the helm and gently pulling it free. Mechadendrites whirled from his gauntlets – tiny saws and needles.

As soon as he saw Xa'ven's face, Yesugei knew that they would not be needed.

The Salamander's ebony features had already turned grey. His lips were pale, his eyes glassy. Yesugei pressed his gauntlet against the ragged wound at his neck, but the blood welled up unstaunched between his fingers.

'Hold on, brother,' he urged.

Xa'ven grabbed Yesugei's arm by the wrist. His face creased in pain.

'Use what you saw,' Xa'ven rasped, blood running between his teeth.

'We should never have done it.'

Xa'ven held on, clutching his arm tight. 'You see what they are, now. Use it.'

His head lolled back. His eyes lost focus.

Yesugei felt sick. 'Brother, I am *sorry*.'

'Just use it.' Xa'ven worked hard to spit out the words. 'Storm-witch.' He grinned painfully. 'Find your Khan.'

Then Xa'ven coughed up a thick gout of blood. His back arched, his hands gripped tighter, before finally falling limp. The blood-slick expanded under him, as dark as oil.

For a moment, Yesugei remained motionless, stunned by the speed of it. He extracted himself from Xa'ven's bloody grasp. His body was still combat-primed, flooded with hyperadrenaline, but for a moment he had no idea what to do. Nausea slowly took over from aggression.

'*Nightmares*,' he said, numbly. 'They release nightmares.' He pulled himself to his feet, hearing the dull clunk as Xa'ven's gauntlet fell back. 'You never see one before, not on Isstvan?'

Henricos shook his head. 'I heard… stories.'

'Stories no longer. This ship should be destroyed. We must leave.'

Henricos stayed crouched over Xa'ven, holding the bloody helm in one hand.

'Then what?' he asked.

'Back to warp. I saw where they are going.'

'Chogoris?'

'No. Prospero.'

Henricos looked up at the smoking silhouette of the machine. 'If we know that, they do too. How are they doing it? How are they locating Legions as they move?'

'I do not know,' said Yesugei, feeling the bitter price of the little knowledge they had bought. 'I do

not know.'

'Why do you call them lodges?' asked Shiban.

'It's a tradition,' said Torghun, drawing his cowl up over his head.

'I have to wear this?'

'To begin with.'

Shiban hesitated. He felt awkward, foolish. More than that, though, it was clandestine, and for reasons he still did not understand.

'I know,' said Torghun. 'It's tedious. But here's the thing – we're all equal in there, at least once the oaths are taken. Show your face before then, and you'd be taking your rank in with you.'

Shiban looked at Torghun. With his face hidden in shadow he looked like a thief. Not even his scar was visible – the mark of the Legion, the one thing that set them apart from all others. 'This will be a small gathering?'

Torghun nodded. 'Nothing grand. They'll be pleased to see another member.'

'How many lodges are there?'

'Across the whole Legion? I don't know. A lot, I think. It fits with the warrior ethos. Someone told me a quarter of Sons of Horus are lodge members. I've no idea whether it's true.'

'How could you have?'

'Well, quite. Ready?'

Shiban pulled the cowl over his head, feeling faintly ridiculous. Torghun moved to the door and depressed the entry rune. It slid back to reveal a darkened chamber. Five or six others stood in the flickering gloom.

Shiban followed Torghun in, and the others parted to give them room. The doors hissed closed.

'Well met, brother,' said the first of the gathered lodge members. 'You bring new blood.'

Torghun bowed. 'One who has proved worthy.'

Shiban took his place in the circle. The faces of the others were only partly hidden – if he had wanted to, he could possibly have guessed the identities of some. The air smelled oddly sweet, as if incense might be burning somewhere close by. All of the assembled White Scars wore their armour under their robes – standard procedure now that the blockade had been established – and it made them look bulky and out of proportion.

'Well met, stranger,' said the speaker. 'You wish to join.'

'To observe,' said Shiban.

'That is acceptable. There is nothing to hide.'

You are wearing a cowl!

'The time for decision is drawing closer,' the speaker went on, addressing the others. 'Questions have been answered, some matters have been clarified. We can speak more plainly now than before – you have all seen the images from the planet below. Can anyone doubt now what we heard from the Warmaster's star-speakers? The schism has come, brothers, just as the Khagan always warned us it would. Now we have to take sides. Our task is to ensure the Fifth Legion remains pure of purpose.'

Shiban listened carefully. So that was it – not a neutral brotherhood, but a faction for Horus. Part of him was surprised at the overtness of it, but perhaps that was naïve.

He could feel Torghun tensing up next to him, as if anxious about Shiban's reaction to what he was being told. Everything about the Terran khan's desire to see him inducted into the lodge felt genuine, almost touchingly so.

They believe in this.

'The link remains established,' the speaker went on. 'The loyal fraternities have already responded, and our window for action shrinks. Preparations are being made across the fleet. We need to be

ready.’

The speaker’s mouth, visible under the shadow of his cowl, spread into a benign smile.

‘They are coming, brothers. They are coming here, to Prospero.’

SIXTEEN

Caves
Rebirth
Still hanging around

Psychneuein.

Magnus had told him of them, but he had spoken of solid, flesh-and-blood things. Products of Prospero's bizarre warp-drenched history, they had been a blight on the otherwise benign world, consuming the minds of mortals. The Thousand Sons had hunted them, driving them into the wilds and far from their glittering spires.

Now, like everything else, they had been reduced to ghosts – remnants of the living horrors they had been. Only, unlike all the other destroyed fauna, they had retained some vestige of their old wills. Their grotesque insectoid bodies still hovered, their sickeningly enlarged craniums still pulsed with the ravenous energies of the immaterium. Their mandibles clacked, just as they always had. Their huge wings still blurred, their twitching stings still arced under their bulging abdomen-sacs – only now they were translucent and shimmering, just psychic echoes of once vital neuro-predators.

They emerged from all over the square, slipping eerily from the stone and sweeping compound eye-bundles around them.

The keshig opened fire with their combi-bolters, sending rounds punching straight through them. That seemed to do nothing but attract them, and they began to home in on the source of the noise.

The Khan charged at the nearest of them, leaping and twisting in the air to plunge his dao through the creature's head, aiming to slice it clean from the thorax.

It connected with nothing. His momentum carried him bodily into the psychneuein's ghostly body, and a sensation of utter frigidity shuddered through him. His hearts burst into overdrive. He felt a sucking at his chest and a rushing boom in his ears.

He stumbled through on the far side of it, falling to one knee, panting heavily. Spots swam before his eyes.

The Khan twisted around, just managing to hold his blade in guard. The thing came at him again, still swaying erratically. It lurched at him, misjudging the direction and ploughing frictionlessly into the ground to his left.

It cannot see.

The Khan withdrew, panting, still feeling the horrific drag on his soul.

'Do not let them touch you,' he voxed. 'They are blind – remain at distance.'

More psychneuein were rising by then, floating over the ash and ruins. One of them seemed to sense the presence of a Terminator close by and swooped straight at him. The warrior – named Maji, a veteran who had carved a bloody trail across a hundred worlds – loosed a perfectly targeted volley from his combi-bolter. The shells did nothing but shred the ruins beyond.

The psychneuein struck, clutching on to Maji with its trailing limbs and angling its swollen abdomen for a sting. Maji lashed out, plunging his blade deep into the creature's body – but nothing connected. The psychneuein latched a long proboscis on to his helm and its glowing tip sunk beneath the ceramite.

Maji *screamed*. In a century of warfare, Maji had never screamed. The noise was appalling – a howl of pure agony wrenched from his helm's augmitters and dragged into the night. Lumpy matter sucked

up the translucent proboscis, which bulged and flexed obscenely. Maji went rigid, embraced by the psychneuein's spectral limbs, dropping his blade and twitching violently. Blood spurted fitfully from his gorget-seal as he was lifted off the ground.

By then another of the keshig had raced to his side, thudding into him and hauling him back. Three more took on the creature itself, pumping bolt-rounds into its incorporeal outline with no visible effect.

The Khan, dao in hand, was almost there himself when he heard fresh buzzing diving low over his head. He skidded to a halt to stare up at the huge outline of a psychneuein dropping down upon him. He felt the same chill as before – like an icy fist closing over his lungs.

He thrust upwards instinctively, punching his blade into the brain-swollen head of the monster. For a terrible moment it felt as if his flesh were being ripped from the bone, flensed out of the armour and dispersed into nothing – then the metal connected with something spongy, piercing it.

The psychneuein recoiled, snapping its mandibles in pain but making no sound. It jolted, flickering in and out of focus. Seeing it could be hurt, the Khan pressed the attack, ripping his blade clear and swiping back at the creature's thorax.

This time, the sword edge struck home. The wounded psychneuein exploded, dissolving into a cloud of lurid brilliance. Shreds of blazing matter radiated out, shrieking through the night in a whirlwind of released energy. The dust howled around him, stirred by the shockwave. A sound like shattering glass rang out across the courtyard, ripping the flagstones apart for metres in every direction.

Damaged by the detonation, the ground gave way further under the Khan's feet, undulating like water before splintering into fragments. With a run of hard, sharp cracks, a fresh fissure yawned wide beneath him, dragging him down amidst an avalanche of tumbling stone and sliding scree.

He tried to grab hold of something, to seize the edge of the hole that was forming and pull himself out. He almost made it – his fingers caught onto a narrow ledge of stone, and for a second he thought that it might hold.

Then the flag cracked and he fell.

A shower of rubble sheered across his helm lenses. Over the thunder of collapsing masonry, he heard the shouts of his warriors, and the maddening buzz of more psychneuein.

Then it was all gone, lost in the roar of breaking stone. He fell fast, hurtling through a blurred underworld of collapsing earth. For a terrible moment he thought it might never stop – that some portal into the warp had been opened up under Prospero's burned surface and that he had been sucked into its maw – but then he hit something solid.

More debris crashed and thudded, burying him even as he slid down further, scrabbling against the slope of whatever he had landed on. In the pitch-darkness his helm struggled to compensate, giving him only blurred and swivelling impressions of where he was.

Slowly, grindingly, he came to a halt. The rock fall continued for a few moments before that too gave out.

He was buried up to his chest. The rock wall at his back felt solid, but everything else remained fragile. He braced himself as best he could.

He had fallen a long way. His helm-display ran with static and gave him no figures, but the crevasse mouth was not visible above him. He felt wedged between shoulders of solidity.

'Qin Xa,' he voxed.

Nothing.

Gingerly, he moved his arm. Somehow he had managed to keep hold of his blade on the way down, and the dao emerged from a cascade of loose scree.

His helm lenses stabilised. His surroundings were revealed in a series of blurry grey outlines, and

he turned his head carefully, scoping.

Tunnels ran away from him, twisting organically in the gloom. Some were choked with rubble, others half-clear. He saw faint shafts of light up ahead, no doubt from where other crevasses led back up to the surface.

The earth around him was honeycombed into chambers and arteries. A void ran away to his right, just over head height but narrow. He could hear more stone-falls in the distance, echoing through the underworld.

'Xa,' he voxed again, carefully pulling himself clear of the debris. The rubble shifted heavily, lodging into the cracks around him, and he sloughed it off.

Again, nothing. The vox-signal hissed with interference.

The space around him was hot and claustrophobic. He could barely move his arms without scraping them, and he had to stoop to move.

He looked up. The path of his descent disappeared after a few metres, lost in the twists and turns of the subterranean warren. He judged how possible it would be to claw his way back up, and reached for a handhold.

The rock crumbled under his touch. More debris tumbled down from the gap, skittering from his armour.

Not possible.

He checked the vox again – no signal. He checked for proximity markers, targets, threat-indicators, and found nothing.

The Khan kicked the last of the rubble from his boots. He could follow the fissure to his right for a while. It was a lead, at least. In this strange underground world of sink-holes and chasms it might open up into something bigger.

He had come looking for caves. He had found them.

Qin Xa tried to run, but the ripple-wave of breaking rockcrete nearly upended him.

'The Khagan!' he roared over the squad-vox, bracing himself against the buck and snap of the earth beneath his feet.

Rifts were opening across the whole expanse of the square. A jetting geyser of methane stabbed up a few metres away, ignited into blue-tinged flame as it thundered. The pillar's plinth fractured.

The warriors of the keshig all moved at the same time, scrambling towards the chasm even as the stone around them buckled. The psychneuein kept up the attack throughout – they seemed to have been maddened by the explosion that had annihilated one of their number.

Maji was dead. He had no visible wounds but the psychneuein kept at him, mobbing his body and extending their proboscises into his prone body. The two warriors who had come to his aid were forced to withdraw, no longer wasting shells on creatures that could not be hit.

Just as Qin Xa neared the chasm that had swallowed the Khan, more psychneuein hove into range, swaying towards him with strangely unerring intent.

Qin Xa leapt up at the nearest, powered by his armour's servos. Following the Khan's example, he sliced it at the junction between wing-bulge and thorax. His blade – perfectly aimed – passed straight through, just as before, freezing him as his arm was absorbed by the ghostly flesh.

The psychneuein locked on to him, sinking tendrils into his still-moving body. Qin Xa dropped away, stricken with preternatural chill and feeling his hearts race out of control. His mind seemed to slacken, as if his very being were being leeched from its frame.

The psychneuein dipped in closer, slavering and chittering. Qin Xa scrambled away, slashing his blades ineffectively. Somehow the Khan had managed to hurt them, but whatever he had done was not easily replicated.

The ground bucked again, and a spear of lightning whipped against the broken pillar. A massive rumble ran up from the ground, breaking open more fissures. Another of the keshig screamed as he was caught, just as Maji had.

We cannot fight this.

'Fall back!' Qin Xa roared, staggering away from the creature in front of him. It came after him, just as erratically as before, guided by some imperfect psychic sense.

The other warriors did not respond to the order immediately. Despite their fearsome levels of discipline, leaving the site of the Khagan's fall was anathema. They surged back across the heaving terrain, lumbering away from the psychneuein attacks as best they could, trying to reach the crumbling maw of the fissure that had swallowed their primarch.

It was a doomed attempt. Another of the creatures struck, clamping on to the foremost warrior and eliciting the now-familiar scream of mental agony. Other psychneuein latched on to the victim's paralysed body, threading their phantasm-tentacles through the heavy battleplate like fingers through water.

'Fall back!' ordered Qin Xa for a second time, retreating steadily across the square. This time the surviving members of the keshig came with him, crunching across the debris, harassed and pursued by swarms of shimmering predators.

They pulled together, faces turned to the oncoming ghosts, and retreated towards the gaping jaws of a bombed-out terrace on the near edge of the square. The psychneuein came after them, still making no sound beyond the endless buzzing, and still swaying blindly.

Qin Xa swept his gaze around the terrain. There was plenty of cover, but that would do little good if the creatures were not hampered by it. Their vision was obviously defective or absent – if they could somehow shake them off, it might be possible to outflank them and get back to the ravine edge. Qin Xa's proximity sensor had lost the Khan's signal, and the vox-channel was silent.

The nine surviving Terminators cleared the perimeter of the ruins. Another warrior – Juma, by the kill-markers on his pauldron – was caught just before crossing the boundary. His battle-brothers immediately made to support him.

'No!' shouted Qin Xa, though it wrenched at him to give the order. 'Stay together. 'Keep moving.'

They obeyed, and pulled back further into the shadow of window-less walls. Behind them, Juma's agony echoed from the stone. They pushed deeper inside, shouldering aside the broken outline of old door-frames and kicking through tottering wall sections.

Qin Xa's mind raced as he went. Nothing hurt them, nothing deterred them. For a terrible moment, he began to wonder if the stories of Space Wolves had been mistaken – perhaps these things were what had devastated the planet, sweeping aside whatever defenders stood up to them.

They broke into what had once been a huge, domed chamber. Spars from the roof still extended upwards, broken halfway like snapped bones. A huge banner, tattered and stiff with ash, hung from a listing flagpole, sporting the eye-motif of Magnus. On the far side stood a largely intact wall, still bearing a marble façade in places. Huge chunks of masonry and steel littered the floor, forming natural barricades. Dust-encased bodies slumped everywhere, mortal and Space Marine alike.

Qin Xa stopped retreating. The remaining keshig fell in beside him, forming up a broken line among the barricades. He heard the clink and shunt of combi-bolters being reloaded.

The psychneuein followed them in. They surged straight through walls and pillars, glistening like warp-trails. Their unholy light fell across the shadowy wreckage.

Qin Xa kept his blades raised. For some reason, it seemed more likely that a sword would hurt them than a ranged weapon. The Khagan had managed it; perhaps it was a matter of technique.

The psychneuein glided closer, dozens of them now, each as insubstantial as jellyfish.

'For the Khagan,' murmured Qin Xa, preparing his soul for the trial.

Then, suddenly, he felt the build-up of enormous power. A second later and the entire chamber filled with light. Flames leapt up from underneath the psychneuein, seemingly bursting from the ground itself.

The creatures wailed and thrashed, caught up in a maelstrom of blazing, purple-tinged fire. One by one they burst apart, exploding with sharp bangs that cracked the earth beneath them. More flames rushed down the line, rearing up and licking along the shafts of the pillars.

The heat was incredible, the sound of it deafening, though the barrage only lasted for a few seconds. The last of the psychneuein vanished, leaving behind only echoing wails and flickers of ghostly after-images.

The chamber-shell fell silent again. Qin Xa scanned around and above, searching for the source. Just as he did so, he felt a fresh surge of power just behind him. He turned, but too late.

His arms went rigid, locked by spidery lines of energy that ran from the gauntlets to the shoulder-joint. He felt a huge weight pressing against his hearts, slowing him down and deadening his movements.

A bolter was pressed against his chest, angled up from a figure before him in crimson armour. His faceplate was gold-crested Mark III, archaic and festooned with Thousand Sons iconography.

'Move and I kill him,' said the legionary, speaking out loud to the entire keshig. The muzzles of half a dozen combi-bolters swivelled in his direction.

Qin Xa blink-transmitted a *desist* order to his brothers. 'And you are?' he asked.

'Revuel Arvida. Last of my kind. You?'

'Qin Xa, Master of the keshig, Fifth Legion.' He looked down at the bolter. Even at point-blank range it probably wouldn't penetrate his Terminator plate – his would-be killer was taking a fearsome risk. 'What happened here?'

The legionary didn't answer for a moment. He stared up at the ivory giants that surrounded him, as though weighing up his options. 'You really don't know?'

Qin Xa felt the grip on his arms slacken. 'My primarch is down there.'

'You can't go back.'

'How do we get to him?'

'You can't. They infest that place.'

Qin Xa felt his heart sink. There had to be a way. 'But you can hurt them.'

Arvida shook his head. 'Not for long. They used to die, now they just come back. Why are you even here? This world is cracking apart.'

The Thousand Sons legionary had an aura about him like Yesugei did, rippling with pent-up energy. He was damaged, though. Qin Xa could hear the strained breathing through his vox-grille.

'We came to find the truth,' he said.

Arvida laughed then, a sour, grating rattle. 'Ah, the truth.'

As he spoke, the sound of more psychneuein gathering echoed from back the way they had come. Arvida lowered his bolter and holstered it.

'They'll be back soon, and I won't be able to stop them again.'

'I will not leave him.'

'You can't do any good, not right now. Trust me, this is – or was – my world.' The buzzing drew nearer. 'I can sense him. He's alive. All you'll do if you stay here is have your mind consumed, which will not help anyone.'

Qin Xa glanced over his shoulder. Through the empty frames of old windows he could see the glow of more swarms. It would not be long before they came again, seeking out souls.

'Lead, then,' he growled, feeling the burn of failure. 'Get us out of here.'

Yesugei headed back to Ledak's holding cell, his mood dark. Henricos's extraction of Xa'ven's gene-seed had been a messy business – he was no Apothecary. It had felt like a further insult to the Salamander's memory.

The death had been unnecessary. It had been reckless, driven by pride and desire for knowledge, all the things he had warned Ahriman against.

Mortals scurried out of his path as he strode along. The ship was being emptied. A few cogitators had been taken over to the *Hesiod*, but almost everything else, including the Word Bearers mortal crew, was staying. The longer Yesugei stayed aboard, the more the place made his flesh crawl.

Daemon. That was the word, the old Gothic title he had not been able to drag to mind until afterwards. *Yaomo* or *yaksha* were the Khorchin equivalents, fragments of old stories that had somehow survived the coming of Unity and the banishment of the old fears.

They had never gone away, not really – just been hidden under a veneer of technological hyperpower.

Xa'ven had deserved better. Yesugei would have liked to have stood beside him when he found Vulkan and had his faith rewarded. He knew how it would have gone: a stoical bow, a brief word of recognition, then back to the task, shoulder to the wheel.

If the entire Imperium had been Promethean, corruption would never have gained so much as a foothold.

He reached the cell doors, and the guards looked at him warily.

'Go now,' he told them.

They stared at one another, then up at him again.

'Lord, I–' one began.

'Go now.'

Yesugei waited until they were gone before opening the doors again. The lumen flickered on as he entered, casting its bleak, antiseptic light over the hanging prisoner.

Ledak opened his eyes and smiled again. 'Back for more, witch?' he asked. 'Where's the other one?'

'Will not be joining us,' said Yesugei, sealing the doors behind him.

The Word Bearers legionary looked at him steadily. 'So what do you want to know?' he asked.

'Nothing.' Yesugei placed his hands together, feeling the first pricks of aetheric power against the inside of his gauntlets.

Ledak nodded resignedly. 'Wondered how long it would take.'

Yesugei looked at him contemptuously. 'Xa'ven was fine warrior. I liked him. I do not think he understood how things change.' He stood before Ledak and raised his hands. 'Everything changes. This ship will soon be atoms. You, too, Ledak.'

The Word Bearers legionary stared back at him, eyeball to eyeball, never flinching. His cheek was still only semi-healed, caked with a pus-streaked crust of scabs.

'Really, no questions?' he asked.

Yesugei shook his head.

'Not any more,' he said, and the chamber filled with fire.

The Khan clambered over a waist-high blockage in the tunnel, squeezing through the gap beyond. His armour grazed the rock, dragging dust down with him. He could hear his breathing echo in his helm, heavy and dragging.

It was horrifically hot. The walls of the tunnels pressed against him, forcing him to bend double. He had only been able to go down, despite several attempts to find a route back to the surface.

The space under the square was bizarre – a honeycomb of capillaries and chambers, all cramped

and fissured, all showing signs of recent movement. The ash that coated the surface was down there, too. There was no water, nor any sign of it. Once or twice he had caught glimpses of a sullen red glow creeping out of the mouths of particular chasms, and had skirted wide around them.

Always down. Some tunnels sloped gently, others plunged along steep gradients of broken stone.

He had stopped often, listening to the beating of his hearts, trying to detect anything but stillness around him. The psychneuein had not followed him down – that was something – but the absence of any movement beyond his own was chilling.

He dragged himself across the blockage, righting himself on the far side. The air felt a little clearer ahead, and the tunnel roof rose by half a metre.

He managed to stand upright, and edged forwards. The dark around him was now complete, picked out in false contours by his helm's night vision. The tunnel widened with every pace. The heat increased.

The Khan travelled another fifty metres or so before it opened up fully. A jagged jawline of stalagmites framed the final obstacle, and he was through into the chamber beyond.

The space was immense. The upper reaches soared away into the darkness, vast and vaulted like some buried cathedral. Gigantic stalactites hung, glossy with the mineral residue of old moisture. Other tunnel entrances opened up along the walls, some high up, others at floor level. The walls curved upwards steeply, terraced like an auditorium and striated with bands of metallic ore. If there had been any light, the whole place might have glinted and refracted it like an immense geode. As it was, his auto-senses picked out the same dreary layer of ash carpeting everything.

He strode out into the centre of the chamber. His footfalls barely echoed in the dust. Ahead of him, huge shapes emerged in the gloom. It took a while for him to see what they were.

A viewing lens lay shattered on the floor, six metres in diameter. Brass instruments lay about it, each one smashed or warped. A huge cylinder the length of a Thunderhawk reared up in the distance, its angled profile disfigured by a long, jagged crack.

The Khan stooped. There were bodies buried beneath the ash and metal: human bodies, mortal in stature. They were naked, or their robes had burned away, leaving nothing but withered flesh and exposed bone. He saw an eyeless, husk-dry face peering up at him from the filth. With a start, he thought that it was moving, but it was nothing but a trick of the dark. Everything, everyone, was dead.

Qin Xa had been right – there was nothing left on Prospero. He had been a fool to come, and a greater fool to come down to the surface in person. Perhaps it could have been scanned from orbit if they had worked harder, and found some way to do it remotely.

He rested his hands upon his knees, and gazed about him. It was only then that he felt it.

A stirring. A restless, gentle movement in the dust.

He leapt to his feet, and whirled around.

The figure before him glowed emptily, just like the psychneuein had done. Witch-light flickered around his ghostly outline, burning coldly.

He stood a little taller than the Khan, just as he had done in life. His face was the same, though the expression was infinitely weary, and a little distracted. His lone eye did not focus – in the past, its focus had been remorseless.

The Khan held his ground, speechless, still gripping his blade. He could feel his hearts pumping, his body flooding with combat readiness.

None of that was necessary. When the figure spoke, the voice dispelled any trace of doubt.

'Jaghatai,' said Magnus, his tired voice echoing strangely. 'My friend. How good to see you again.'

SEVENTEEN

Push back
Into the warp
Dead end

Shiban hurried down the *Kaljian*'s corridors towards his private chambers. The ship rang with activity and the mortal crew scurried out of his path. He didn't acknowledge any of them.

He reached his chamber and went inside. His glaive hung on brackets on the wall, surrounded by devotional flags. He glanced at it for a moment, noting as if for the first time the balance in the weapon. Parchment scrolls suspended under the brackets recorded its significant kills, listed in sequence like one of his old poems.

Looking at the blade, one of the signature weapons of the Legion, Shiban felt a mixture of emotions. Once it would have been nothing but pride. Now, given what he had seen and heard, it was impossible to feel quite the same way.

He turned away and activated the console over his meditation altar. An access hololith spun into life – Shiban synched his armour's systems with the altar and called up summary fleet data.

'Khan?'

He turned to see Jochi in the doorway.

'We have not sparred for a while. I thought it might–'

Shiban pushed past him and closed the slide-door.

'What are you doing?' asked Jochi.

'I cannot say,' said Shiban, locking the door.

Jochi looked nonplussed. 'Cannot say what?'

Shiban looked hard at him. '*I cannot say*.'

A puzzled frown creased Jochi's brow. 'Khan, are you all right?'

Shiban relaxed. There was no deception there. Jochi was a straight-forward soul – a cheerful hunter in the best tradition of the Legion.

'Tell me what you know of warrior lodges,' said Shiban, walking back to the altar.

'Warrior lodges? Nothing, I do not think.'

'You are aware they exist.'

Jochi shrugged. 'I heard stories, from other Legions. They are not present in the White Scars.'

Shiban snorted. 'They are. They very much are.' The hololith danced in front of him. It showed the ship markers of the fleet over Prospero. They were deployed in a standard blockade pattern, spread out widely across orbital intervals. The *Swordstorm* held position over the site of Tizca, once the planet's most heavily urbanised zone.

Jochi drew alongside him. 'What has happened?'

'One of the dead on Phemus was a lodge member. It has been going on for years. Among the Terrans, to begin with, but it has spread. They meet in secret. They plan in secret.'

'How do you know this?'

'They invited me to join.' Shiban smiled dryly. 'They thought it would appeal to me. A true warrior, they said.'

'Who did?'

'You remember the Terran from Chondax? The Brotherhood of the Moon?'

Jochi nodded. ‘I never liked him.’

‘I did, in the end.’

‘You must report it. To Hasik.’

‘Hasik is a member,’ Shiban sighed.

Jochi let slip a low whistle. ‘Who is not, then?’

‘That is the problem.’

Jochi thought for a moment. ‘Is this something to be concerned about? What is their purpose?’

‘We have been too slow,’ said Shiban. ‘The Khagan has been too slow. They have already made their choice. When the moment comes, they will move, as one, as silently as they do now.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘They are readying the Legion. They have been running some form of communication with the Warmaster – at least since Chondax, possibly even while we were still fighting. By the time the Khagan returns, it may already be over.’

‘We do not know Horus is a traitor.’

‘Yes, that is the point. We know nothing.’ Shiban looked back over to the glaive, and wondered whether to take it with him. It would draw attention, but might be useful. ‘It is not our decision to make. Why do you think the Khagan brought us to this place?’

‘He has been on the surface for a long time.’

‘That is his prerogative. We need to move.’

‘They invited you,’ said Jochi warily. ‘Will they not be watching? If they have kept the secret for this long…’

‘The time for secrecy is over. They showed their hand, they knew the risks.’

‘Khan.’ Jochi rested a gauntlet on his arm, halting him. ‘Hasik is noyan-khan. You cannot go against him.’

‘No, I know.’

‘Then what will you do?’

Shiban gave him a bleak smile. ‘Find someone who can.’

The Vorkaudar burned in the void, its engines ignited and its structure leaking atmosphere. The ship-carcass turned slowly in the dark, rocked by secondary explosions.

It was a strangely eerie sight. Yesugei watched the fires from the *Sickle Moon*’s observation deck and thought of old cleansing rites. The banishment of a yaksha was always accompanied by flame-ceremonies, and had been for as long as humans had dwelt on Chogoris.

‘We are ready, lord,’ said Lushan.

Yesugei turned away from the viewports. Lushan stood before him, quietly attentive as ever.

‘What is the status of the ship?’ he asked.

‘Heavy damage. The Navigator–’

‘Warns against it. Yes, that is understood. How about the *Hesiod*?’

‘It has fared better.’

‘I am sure it enjoyed some protection, at least until it fell into our hands.’

Yesugei still could not shake off what he had seen. The Word Bearers had gone from a proud Legion at the forefront of the Great Crusade to a degenerate horde of zealots, and in such a short time. Their ship had been a casket of horrors. He could still see Ledak’s confident leer as he died. They revelled in what they had become.

Xa’ven had deserved a better death.

‘Then will you give the order?’ asked Lushan.

‘You may translate when ready,’ said Yesugei. ‘Ensure the *Hesiod* remains in tandem during the

voyage.'

Lushan bowed, and withdrew to the command throne to begin the process. Alone again on the observation deck, Yesugei watched silent secondary detonations rock the *Vorkaudar*.

At least they knew where they were going, now. The daemonic device had shown them just how vast the warp storms were, just how powerful. It would be difficult to get anywhere through them quickly, as it had been before.

Horus had not only suborned Legions to his cause – he had somehow fractured the skin between realities and made the galaxy erupt in pain.

What power can do that? What power can rupture the arc of the heavens?

Even the Emperor, surely, did not possess such command. Magnus did not, nor did any psyker, witch or xenos that Yesugei had ever met. Some questions had yet to be answered.

Henricos's outline flickered into being beside him. The Iron Hands legionary stood life-size in hololithic projection. His augmented armour made him look hunched and crab-like.

'*A final check*,' he rasped. '*You're sure about this?*'

'Not sure about anything, son of Medusa, but will not stay here and wait for war to come to me.'

Henricos grunted in approval. '*You know the enemy will have seen those projections too*.'

'Of course.'

'*They'll be heading for Prospero, just as we will*.'

'I am aware. We must be quicker.'

Henricos laughed in his brazen, cynical way. '*And break our ships apart in the process*.'

'That will not happen.'

'*So you say*.'

Yesugei smiled tolerantly. 'We have you, my friend. Have confidence in your abilities, like Xa'ven did.' He turned back to the viewer as the wreckage of the *Vorkaudar* slewed out of range. 'And you have me. Has always been ambition of mine, to guide starship through aether. Navigators are worthy souls, but even they can learn few new tricks.'

Henricos looked at him sidelong, his helm-outline flickering green. '*I don't doubt you, weather-maker, but when we found you, you had no idea what had happened on Isstvan. I have to ask. This thing has already tested loyalties. What makes you think that, if we get there, your Khan will have made the same choice as us?*'

Yesugei started. It was something he had not even considered.

'He would never–'

'*Yes, I know – never become like them. But it's not that simple. We all loved Horus. Ferrus loved Horus. Sometimes all the data just isn't there, and by the time you find them, your path has already been set*.'

'He will know the truth.'

'*You dreamed about him dying*.'

Yesugei raised an eyebrow. He did not remember telling Henricos about those dreams.

'*Xa'ven told me*,' said Henricos. '*He was worried. You have to prepare yourself, brother. It was the primarchs who brought this thing down on us. They're the flawed gods. Here's the crux of it – how well do you know the Khan?*'

Yesugei could have laughed out loud then. He could have told him of the decades they had spent with one another, hunting under the unbroken blue sky, storming the crumbling walls of palaces. Then, later, taking to the void in the first V Legion starships, charging out to the margins of the galaxy where the light of the core grew dim and the void itself shimmered with alien energies.

He could have also remembered the restlessness, the frustration with Terra, the closeness to his Warmaster brother.

You call, I answer.

'You do not anger me, Bion,' said Yesugei. 'You are right to ask. Let me ask question of my own – if you ever doubted Ferrus, deep down, even to point of thinking him traitor, would you not still seek him out, if you could?'

'*Of course. That's not the issue. Here's the issue – when we get there, if he's declared for the Warmaster, what will you do?*'

Yesugei did not have an answer. The possibility was so unconscionable, so utterly beyond expectation, that he truthfully had no idea.

'I ask Xa'ven, once,' Yesugei said, 'what justify optimism. You know what he tell me? Faith.'

Henricos snorted. '*We left all that behind*.'

'We did.'

Yesugei watched as the warp shutters rolled down across the viewports. In his last glimpse of real space before the warp drives geared up, he saw the flickering death of the *Vorkaudar*, a tomb to those who had believed too much.

'Perhaps, though, we have to relearn it.'

'Why are the shields down?' Ilya demanded, striding angrily across the *Swordstorm*'s command bridge.

Halji followed tolerantly in her wake. 'We lost teleport locus for the Khagan. We are keeping shields down in case he requires immediate translation.'

'What about the rest? Where's Qin Xa?'

All around her, in the many terraces and mezzanine decks of the capacious bridge, serfs and menials worked frantically at their stations. Signals continued to stream in from the planetary augurs, most of them red-lined.

'We are working on it, szu.'

Ilya turned on him. 'This isn't good enough. I didn't choose to take this work on, I was chosen. You may not like it, but he gave me the mandate.'

Halji spread his hands in apology. 'As I say, we are working.'

Ilya cursed under her breath. The whole thing had been *stupid* – the Khan must have seen the tectonic readings, known about the aether-burn swirling around Prospero's ravaged troposphere, and yet he had translated anyway. From what she could see, the planet looked liable to break apart at any time, and yet the fleet still hung in low orbit, shields down and in a loose spread.

It was all so arbitrary – exactly the failing she had worked so hard to eradicate from the Legion.

She looked up, over half a dozen marble platforms and balustrades, to where Hasik Noyan-Khan stood, surrounded by his retinue, tech-priests and bridge crew. In the absence of the Khagan he was in command of the battleship and, by extension, the fleet. She could not remember seeing the order given to teleport him onto the bridge.

'It's as if they're waiting for something,' she murmured.

'What was that?' asked Halji, standing over her shoulder.

'Are we expecting a rendezvous?' she asked, moving over to a pict-feed and adjusting the feeder dials. 'Why has the *Guang-zho* moved out of position?'

Halji shook his head. 'You have all data, szu.'

She did. It was all at her fingertips. More importantly, though, it was stored in her eidetic memory. She had seen and signed off the deployment plans, and knew exactly where every ship was meant to be, how long it was meant to be there and which vessels would come to relieve it when the rotations were programmed.

'Things are changing,' she muttered, calling up a series of ledgers. 'Personnel are moving between

ships.'

'That is normal.'

'Not in these numbers.' Ilya frowned. 'Halji, have orders been given to recombine brotherhoods, like we did on Chondax?'

'Not that I am aware.'

'Look at this.' She pulled the viewing lens across on its brass support and showed it to him. 'Khans are moving all over the place. Not just khans – the *Starspear*'s shuttle-bays are unusually active.'

Halji took it all in. 'It has been long journey,' he said. 'We are not required to monitor every shuttle movement.'

'But *I* am.' She pushed her hair back and called up more data. 'Hasik should be told. Where the hell is the Khagan? We should authorise a retrieval party, get someone down to the surface.'

'We are–'

'Working on it, yes. You're taking this remarkably calmly.' Ilya glanced up at Halji. The White Scars legionary wore his helm, just as all the other White Scars on the bridge did. That in itself was unusual – they normally only donned them on the absolute brink of combat. 'Is there something going on that I haven't been told about, Halji?'

Halji looked down at her. He did not respond immediately, which in itself was out of character.

'Szu, I cannot say,' he replied.

Jemulan Noyan-Khan's chambers were decorated with a mix of Terran and Chogorian iconography. Straight swords mingled with tulwars, literal expeditionary fleet emblems with Khorchin calligraphic versions beside them. Though Chogorian himself, he had never made as much of the heritage as Hasik. His skin was darker than the norm, the legacy of his roots in the Palatine's old domains of the Empty Quarter, though the long scar on his cheek was as stark as any of his brothers'.

'You are not of my horde,' he said, looking at Shiban doubtfully.

The two of them were alone in the chamber. Amber light from Prospero's old sun filtered through onto the Qo rugs and Khitan altars.

'I know,' replied Shiban, bowing in apology. 'I would not have come if I could think of another way.'

'Hasik is your ordu lord.'

'I cannot raise this with him.'

'Really? I cannot think of a reason why not.'

'Noyan-khan, there are warrior lodges active in the Legion.'

Jemulan raised an eyebrow. 'What of it?'

'They have made communication with the Warmaster. They have made him aware of our movements. They wish to force the Khagan's hand in his favour.'

Jemulan frowned. 'Nothing forces the Khagan's hand in anything.'

'Many khans are involved. They are moving between ships, readying for his arrival. Hasik is a member. Others of the command group are members. For all I know, lord, you are one too, but my options were limited.'

Jemulan smiled thinly. 'I am a member of nothing but my horde and my Legion.'

'They are well organised,' said Shiban. 'They have been planning for a long time. When the Khagan returns, he will find a Legion ready to answer the Warmaster's call.'

'How do you know this?'

'Because they inducted me. They are moving fast now, knowing that time is running out.'

'Then they made a mistake, bringing you into their confidence.'

Shiban paused. 'Perhaps they did.'

Jemulan waved his hand impatiently. ‘Fanciful.’ He walked over to the observation ports. In the far distance he could see the immense silhouette of the *Swordstorm*, just visible over the dark curve of Prospero’s turbulent atmosphere. ‘You think I would not know of this, if it were happening?’

‘They have been careful.’

‘Not really.’ He turned back to look at Shiban. ‘Not with you.’

‘The preparations have all been made. They do not think anything can stop them now.’

‘All the more reason to be cautious.’ Jemulan shook his head. ‘A Legion is an incubator for gossip and conspiracies. I once heard of a plot to exterminate the Terran aspirants in order to make the Legion Chogorian-pure. Many of my officers believed it enough to come to me with their concerns. It was nonsense, just as this is.’

‘I have been to a session, lord. I saw what they were doing.’

‘Let me guess. Sitting around, talking about revolution, complaining about the inertia of their leaders, hankering for more fighting. Warriors have done that since there have been swords for them to take up.’ Jemulan turned back towards him. ‘This is a difficult time. There is much we do not understand. It is natural to be impatient, but trust in the Khagan. He came here for a reason. He will choose the right course.’

‘I have no doubt in him,’ said Shiban. ‘It is the Legion. There is a cancer at its heart.’

Jemulan raised an eyebrow. ‘Cancer? A little florid, don’t you think?’

‘Could you not investigate?’

Jemulan’s face remained stony. ‘No, I could not. The fleet is on a war-footing. The Khagan will soon return, and I must be ready for orders. Khan, this is the wrong time. Go back to your ship. Prepare your warriors. There is enough uncertainty here without introducing more.’

Shiban hesitated. Jemulan’s tone was final. Part of him, conditioned by years of training, moved to comply.

‘Will you at least take this?’ he said, handing Jemulan the medal he had retrieved from Phemus IV.

Jemulan held it up, turning it in the light. ‘What is it?’

‘A marker. Please, if you do nothing else, keep it.’

Jemulan glared at him. A noyan-khan was not used to being petitioned. For a moment Shiban thought that he would hurl the medal back at him, but he stood his ground. Eventually, Jemulan’s gauntlet closed over the silver.

‘You should go now, khan,’ he said coldly. ‘I have heard enough.’

Shiban bowed. ‘Thank you for–’

Jemulan had already turned his back.

Jochi was waiting outside. ‘What did he say?’

Shiban kept walking, and the two of them strode back through the decks towards the shuttle bays.

‘He did not see the problem.’

‘I did not think he would.’

Shiban said nothing. It had been a slim hope – Jemulan did not have quite the same reputation as Hasik. He had not been there from the start. He was not as close to the Khagan. Perhaps it had always been too much to expect.

‘So what now? Do we wait for the Khagan to return?’

Shiban shook his head. ‘No. We are not children.’ He stopped walking. ‘We are *reacting*. We are waiting for others to move. When did that become our way? This thing needs to be seized.’

‘What do you have in mind?’

‘The *Swordstorm*,’ said Shiban firmly. ‘We cannot influence anything on the *Kaljian*.’

‘Hasik is already there.’

‘Then we need to be there too.’

‘That means disobeying orders.’

‘It does.’

Jochi smiled. ‘As long as I know.’

‘We will gather the brotherhood. All of them. They will be opposed to this madness, at least.’

‘How far will this go, khan?’

‘You mean, what am I prepared to do to halt it?’

Shiban thought of his guan dao glaive – the one that Hasik had given him upon his Ascension – hanging silently in his chambers, waiting. It would be in his hands again soon enough.

He thought of the last battle on Chondax, when he had witnessed the Khan fighting with such poise and perfection – the art of combat given physical form – that he had thought nothing could ever come close in imagination or reality.

He thought of his first meeting with Yesugei on the plains of home, the wind pulling at his hair.

These were the things that had made him. These were the things that made the Legion.

‘Anything, Jochi,’ he said, starting walking again. ‘I will do anything.’

EIGHTEEN

The Crimson King
Corvidae
The muster

The Khan did not believe the evidence of his senses for a long time. He kept his dao raised, poised to strike, as it had done against the psychneuein.

The spectre before him was just as they had been – translucent, glowing with faint light, flickering and broken as if filtered by a faulty hololith projector.

'What are you?' the Khan asked warily.

The shade looked thoughtful. 'A remnant,' he said slowly. 'A dream of something destroyed.' He raised an insubstantial hand and held it up before an insubstantial face. 'Matter. Thought. Energy. We have learned that there is not much difference, in the end, between them all.'

The Khan held his ground. Magnus's voice was the same, exactly the same – sonorous, a little mournful, rich with the accumulated cadences of a hundred dialects. His baroque armour was cracked open, hanging from his frame in slivers. His cloak was ripped, and his robes were stained with old blood.

'You are not Magnus,' said the Khan.

'Maybe not entirely,' mused the shade. 'Maybe not. But we share a soul. That is the important thing – the soul. I see yours before me, much as it ever was. Impatient. Burning with resentment. I did not think to see it again.'

The Khan's eyes narrowed. The likeness was uncanny – almost seductively so. The way the shade moved, the aura it projected, they were all the same. The phantasm picked its way through the dust before sitting heavily upon the shell of the great bronze Occullum scope. The metal flexed beneath his weight. In some sense, then, the spectre influenced the world of matter.

'Put your sword down,' said Magnus. 'You couldn't hurt me with it, and I have no intention of hurting you.'

The Khan lowered the point but did not sheathe it. 'What happened here?'

Magnus smiled wearily. 'The Wolves happened. Our father's vengeance, sent from Fenris. They brought the Sisters with them too, and Valdor. Such violence. Valdor is a machine. Russ, for all his theatricality, is little different. It happened rather quickly in the end.'

The Khan felt hollow. Despite all that he had seen, to hear confirmation of it was still hard.

'I don't understand,' he said. 'Why did they do it?'

Magnus drew in a long breath. As he did so, the dust around him stirred. 'Don't blame them. They were doing what they were bred to do, like dogs trained on a scent. And they were right to bring me to heel, in a way. I made mistakes. You warned me of some of them, back before I went to Nikaea. You remember when we spoke on Ullanor? I should have listened then. But I never did listen well. Happier to be listened *to*, more's the pity.'

The Khan watched Magnus carefully as he spoke. The old flamboyance had gone, replaced by a kind of grim resignation. Every so often his outline would flicker out almost completely, then restore itself weakly. The ghostly presence looked on the verge of guttering out, as if sustained by some damaged power source.

'Magnus,' said the Khan, controlling his impatience badly. 'Tell me plainly.'

‘You were right,’ said Magnus. ‘You were right, and that is all there is to say. I should have restrained my sons. You never made the bargains I had to, so your Legion was never compromised. But here’s the truth – we were all deceived. All of us. The Ocean was never benign, and it was conspiring against us even as we stepped into its shallows. The greater the soul, the greater the jeopardy. Horus was the greatest soul of them all, and so his was the furthest fall. Tell you plainly? Very well. Horus has been eaten by the warp. His body is bursting with it, corroding him, gnawing at him from the inside. There were others – Erebus, Lorgar – but it was his decision in the end. He can’t hide behind them, for they were only shadows compared to him.’

The Khan drew closer, never taking his eyes from Magnus’s face. It was hard to follow his train of thought – the Crimson King’s mind had always worked in strange, roundabout ways.

‘I tried to warn our father,’ said Magnus. ‘That was my crime, and this is the punishment.’ He looked around the dust-caked caves. ‘It was pride, that was all. Pride that swallowed Horus, too. You see, Jaghatai, here’s the problem – we were made too well. Nothing in the galaxy could stand against us. We learned that we, and only we, held the destiny of a billion worlds in our own hands. So the gods waited and they watched, and they realised what we did not – that only the primarchs could destroy the primarchs. Only *we* could bring down the eternal Imperium, because everything else had been annihilated. That’s what Lorgar called it. The Primordial Annihilator.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘Save me, but Lorgar can be tedious. He might grasp the deeper truths, but he’s as much of a slave to his gene-coding as the rest of us.’

The Khan squatted down, bringing his eyes into line with Magnus’s. He rested his dao tip-down on the rock floor.

‘Russ did this?’ he asked.

Magnus nodded. ‘As completely as he does everything.’

‘And Horus?’

‘No, brother. No.’ Magnus shook his head a little impatiently. ‘Do you not see yet? We are all just two sides of the same coin. Most of us have cast our lots, and only a few remain. Then the game begins. I have come to see it like this – the gods demand entertainment. They demand contest and trial. We could not be allowed to defeat our own daemons, for that would be boring, and boredom is the only thing the eternals fear. We are being lined up, one by one, to tear at one another’s throats. I do not think they wish to see a victor. I think they wish us to fight forever, locked in madness until the universe’s end.’

Magnus smiled again at the Khan. It used to be a warmer smile; now it was condescending, self-aware, cynical.

‘I see much, from my new home,’ he said. ‘I see how things are lining up. You’re one of the last, Jaghatai. They don’t know which way you will go. None of them do, and that’s why you have the eyes of the galaxy on you at last.’

‘Do not talk like this,’ said the Khan, coldly. ‘I have never taken sides.’

‘You’d take them all on?’ laughed Magnus. ‘I believe you would at that. But come, there are only two paths here – you can hunker down in what remains of our father’s Imperium and try to keep the moon-wolf from beating down the door, or you can remember how Horus used to be, and stand at his side as he brings terror to the complacent. The first would be the more loyal course, but the other has its merits.’

‘What of you?’

Magnus paused then, as if the question had only just occurred to him. ‘Me? What of me?’ His one eye creased under a lone eyebrow. ‘My choices are constrained. I know more than anyone what awaits us on the other side. Do you think I welcome that? It is the ruin I worked for centuries to avoid, but our father is not the forgiving sort. My bridges are burned with him. They were burned when I broke

the wards over his little project.'

Magnus looked sidelong at the Khan.

'He's been up to all sorts of things, our beloved father. Consorting with xenos, resurrecting ancient technology. Don't believe that he is blameless in this, nor that old conspirator Malcador. Every choice is tainted now, and we're all dancing down the same path of decay. The only question is which herd to follow, and which doom is less disagreeable.'

'No.' The Khan stood up again. 'Whatever you are, you are not Magnus. You don't even sound like him.'

Magnus shrugged. 'Believe what you want. Perhaps I am *not* Magnus. I used to be, that is certain, but maybe what counts as my *self* is not what it was. Part of me dwells elsewhere, on a barren rock halfway across the cosmos. Part of me is here, lingering like a stench over carrion. I can't quite leave, not yet. I think something has to happen first. Maybe you are it, or maybe you were never meant to be here. I favour the latter – you were always unpredictable.'

'I came to find a friend,' said the Khan distastefully. 'Whatever else had happened, I thought, I could come to you for counsel.'

Magnus looked hurt. 'Do not be harsh, *Khagan*. Only a part of me resides here, slinking in the shadows. The better part is elsewhere, pondering loftier things. Soon he – or I, or we – will come to a judgement.'

'What will that be?'

'I don't know. I really don't. Lorgar sends me pleas almost daily, reminding me what Russ did here. He thinks we are kindred spirits. Touching, really.' Magnus paused, and stared down at his flickering hands. 'Sometimes, though, I still think there might be some way back. I see it as a maze, one in which all I have to do is find the route through. Perhaps the Emperor will forgive. If He survives what I have unleashed, perhaps He will.' Then Magnus's spectral eye flicked up at the Khan again. 'But you, Jaghatai? What is your choice?'

The Khan shook his head. 'We are who we are – no one's slaves.'

Magnus laughed. 'That's not good enough. You have to choose.'

'If what you say is true, then the dream is over. It will be each Legion alone.'

'It doesn't work like that.'

'Horus is corrupted, the Emperor is a tyrant.'

'True enough.'

'Then I choose neither.'

Magnus laughed again, though the sound was bitter. 'This thing is a like a great dark star, ringed by fire. It will draw you in, bit by bit, until you are orbiting it with the rest of us. Even you do not have ships fast enough to escape it, Jaghatai. Even your White Scars will not get out.'

The Khan felt sick from the stink of death and ashes. His blade glittered coldly in the near-perfect dark. 'We can outrun anything that lives.'

'But they do not live, not like we do. I do not lie, brother. Choose. We will meet again, either as allies or foes, so you may as well decide now.'

The Khan stared down at Magnus, his mind in turmoil.

'What have you become?' he asked, no longer able to keep the horror from his voice.

'What I was always destined to be,' said Magnus, looking at him sadly. 'But you still have a choice, brother. Make the right one.'

The chamber, like all those that they had marched through, must once have been magnificent. Qin Xa had stopped noticing the shattered finery – after a while, it became depressing to think on it.

Arvida had led them far through the empty city. As they went, the ground had shaken more

frequently; cracks opened before their eyes, shooting up the sides of already broken walls. They had passed shafts that went down a long, long way, their hearts glowing red like molten iron. Some whole districts seemed to have slumped into the earth, lost in smoke-choked sinkholes.

They ended up in the ruins of a grand audience chamber. Ionic pillars soared up above them, holding aloft a half-collapsed dome. Marble bookcases lined the immense walls, though the contents had been burned away. The floor was strewn with debris, and each of the three doorways were blocked with makeshift barricades.

'I can't offer you much,' said the legionary dryly, limping over to an old stone throne at the centre of the space. He sounded exhausted.

Qin Xa and the others remained standing. 'How long have you been here?' he asked.

Arvida shook his head. 'No idea.' He tapped the side of his helm. 'Chrono's blown. Every day's the same. You lose track.'

Qin Xa looked around the chamber. An old library, perhaps. He tried to imagine it as it had once been.

'There are no others?' Qin Xa asked.

'Not that I've found.' The legionary looked up at him. 'I was of the Fourth Fellowship. I was a sergeant.'

'Your squad?'

'Dead.'

'What happened?'

'I ask myself the same thing.' Arvida drew in a long, filtered breath. 'If you wish to know why this planet was burned, I can't tell you. I arrived after the fighting was over. That's why I am still alive. I'd rather have fought the Wolves, though. I'd rather have died and drawn some blood, rather than skulk in the remains, ignorant and useless.'

'Avoiding those… things?'

'The psychneuein, aye. Or rather, what became of them. There are other things, too. Fragments, ghosts. Prospero was soaked in the aether – it's to be expected. There's an aura, burning away up there. An aftershock. Sometimes I hear the voices of those who died. In the beginning I went after them, hoping. I stopped that. They're just voices now. I don't think they're even really here.'

Qin Xa regarded Arvida watchfully. The sorcerer's power was prodigious, even for one of his hexed kind, but his voice was barely more than a whisper. 'When did you last eat?'

'Like I say, the chronos have blown. A long time.'

Qin Xa gestured to one of the keshig, who opened a compartment in his armour plate and produced a nutri-pack. He lumbered over to Arvida and offered it.

The legionary took it, snapping open the receptacle under his breastplate and slotting it in. The armour's mechanisms would do the rest – feeding sustenance slowly into his bloodstream, restoring what needed to be restored. Physically, at least.

'You know we need to go back,' said Qin Xa.

'For your primarch? I wouldn't worry. He can fight them. Throne, he was *made* to fight them.' Arvida rolled his shoulders slowly, as if feeling sensation come back into long-starved muscles. 'I was trying to get there myself. There's something down there. The only source of power left. They beat me back every time.'

'What is it?'

Arvida shrugged. 'The Reflecting Caves are under the square. Perhaps something Magnus made still survives in the caverns. He made a lot of things, including enemies.'

Qin Xa checked his helm display. Contact with the fleet was still broken, but he might be able to get a data-burst through. 'We have ships in orbit. Whole brotherhoods. If we need to break down–'

‘He’ll be back. Don’t waste lives on it. Get away from this world – that’s the only thing.’ He looked up at Qin Xa, and something about the look gave away his desperation. ‘And take me with you.’

Qin Xa checked the vox-link again.

‘If I get a lock, I will call in more support,’ he said. ‘But when you are restored, we are going back to the square. I will not leave him.’

Arvida nodded, as if he had known what Qin Xa was going to say before he said it. ‘Fine. Whatever you wish. Give me some time, though. I’ll need it, if you want any kind of chance. I’m no *pyrae* – it’s not my discipline.’

‘What is, then?’

Arvida snorted a dry, bitter laugh. ‘Seeing the future,’ he said. ‘That turned out well, didn’t it?’

Torghun marched down the *Starspear*’s embarkation deck, over to where the Stormbirds waited on their launch rails. He was in full armour, his face hidden behind his angular helm. Hibou Khan marched beside him, similarly decked out. Behind them came warriors of their brotherhoods – hundreds of them, their boots clanking on the rough floor.

‘It failed, brother,’ said Hibou.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Torghun.

‘Your project. The Brotherhood of the Storm. Their khan’s been to see Jemulan. Hasik is not pleased.’

Torghun felt a spike of irritation. ‘It was at his request.’

Hibou chuckled, though the sound was tinny behind the vox-grille. ‘It does not matter much. The word is out now – there are disputes on a dozen frigates. Shiban is just one of the hold-outs, but there will be many more.’

‘What did Jemulan tell him?’

‘Who knows? Things are moving too quickly. Hasik has the *Swordstorm*, and I will take the *Tchin-Zar*. As long as we hold the capital ships the others will fall into line.’

Torghun turned to him. ‘And what of the Khagan?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If he doesn’t see the truth of it?’

Hibou snorted. ‘You heard the speaker’s testimony – Horus and the Khagan have always seen things the same way. What could he do, if his fleet is of one mind? He will recognise what we have done. He will see the justice in it.’ Hibou turned to him. ‘You made your choice. Do not doubt it, brother. It was the right one.’

Torghun knew that. He had made his choice a long time ago, years back when the first stirrings of the lodges had come to his ears. It was the chance to mould the Legion into what it should have been – a shock-attack force to rival the vaunted Speartip of the Sons of Horus, only shackled to a greater, more generous mind than that of the flighty Khan.

Only now, as the final stages of the long game drew to their conclusion, had his resolve cracked a little. The way Shiban had looked at him after the final session – disappointed, even disbelieving. It should not have mattered, but somehow it did.

‘This is the destiny of the Legion,’ Hibou went on. ‘The Khagan knows it, deep down. All we are doing is helping the process along.’

Ahead of them yawned the hangar’s vast void-entrance, glowing with marker lights and open to the starfield beyond. Warriors dispersed to their Stormbirds, breaking into squads and marching up the ramps.

‘You know your orders,’ said Hibou, turning to Torghun before making his way to his own gunship.

Torghun nodded. Before a mission he had always felt good, his body responding quickly to the stimms and battle-hormones. But it was difficult to feel the same euphoria now, no matter how hard he worked to summon it.

'For the Imperium, brother,' said Torghun, making the sign of the aquila.

Hibou returned the gesture. 'For the–'

He broke off. Torghun's helm-system suddenly fed him a relayed augur-reading from the *Swordstorm*. Every lodge member, he knew, would be seeing the same thing. Watching the runes glow against his retinal feed gave him an odd sensation – a twist in the stomach, like anticipation.

Hibou looked at him and laughed. He clapped his gauntlet against Torghun's shoulder guard.

'Rejoice, brother,' he said, his voice resonant with excitement. 'We have called, and *he* has answered.'

Torghun looked at the signals, still on the edge of the system but already moving in close – three of them, then four. He could sense Hibou's elation, and wondered why he struggled to match it with his own.

'I see it,' Torghun said, working to keep his voice light. He remembered the wolf-moon icon, streaked with rain, a lifetime ago and a galaxy's-span away. 'He's here, then. He's here at last.'

Shiban strode to the balcony overlooking the *Kaljian*'s main crew assembly chamber. His armour shone from the overhead lumens. The tech-priests and armoury servitors had restored it to perfection after Phemus, and it no longer bore any of the marks of that cursed world. His glaive felt light in his hand.

'Brothers!' he said, addressing the near-five hundred warriors arranged before him. They stood in their squads, each one arrayed in ivory battleplate, each one silently expectant. 'You have all heard the rumours running around the Legion. You have all heard that we are now adrift, that the Emperor has turned tyrant, that Horus is a traitor and that all allegiances are now suspect. Some of you will have made your own minds up. You may have fought over it, or you may have kept your counsel to yourself.'

Shiban scanned the ranks of warriors. As he did so, he felt a quiet surge of pride. Chogorian runes, engraved starkly upon the bone-white plate, gazed back at him, each one a masterpiece of calligraphy. Above them hung the battle standards of the brotherhood – the lightning sigil of the khans, the storm-motif, the long lists of past engagements.

'Everything we thought we knew has been shown to be false. Brother now fights against brother. You can see through the viewports where this has taken us – Prospero is a burned wasteland, and there can be no going back from that.'

Jochi stood at his shoulder, dependable as granite. Shiban was glad of his presence – Jochi had never queried anything, never questioned an order. He was the epitome of loyalty.

'There will be vengeance for this,' he said, 'and we will be a part of it. But until the Khagan rules, there can be no fresh hunt. All of you, when you ascended, when you gave yourself the scar that marks you, accepted this. We are not fighters, ripe to murder when the whim take us – we are *legionaries*. We are warriors of the ordu of Jaghatai.'

The assembly chamber rang with his vox-amplified words. Polished walls of marble and jet glimmered dully, reflecting the armour within. From far below came the clunk and whine of hangar lifters preparing the brotherhood's speeders.

'Not all of our battle-brothers feel this way,' Shiban went on. 'Some are seeking to pre-empt the order. They have been working for a long time, fed by information from beyond the Legion, encouraged to believe the word of outsiders who have no understanding of our ways or our culture.'

He remembered Torghun's enthusiasm, his trust. Not for the first time, Shiban wondered why the

Terran had taken the risk of inviting him in – he must have known the likelihood of rejection. Was it arrogance? Or had he been searching, somehow, for confirmation?

'They may be right, brothers. They may be right when they claim that the Warmaster has been betrayed and now demands our fealty. They may speak the truth when they proclaim the Emperor's hand in the holocaust on the world below us. I do not know. And that is the core of it – none of us do. Only one in this Legion has the authority to order us to war. He remains silent, and so we must wait.'

Shiban felt his pulse pick up. He was coming to the turning point.

'Time has now run out. The lodges have called the Warmaster, and he has answered. The fleet is already half pledged to his cause. Many others are ignorant, knowledge is guarded by the few.'

Shiban's voice remained quiet as he spoke – the soft, subtle tones he had learned as an aspirant in Khum Karta – but he infused them with solidity. They would need to believe in him. They would need to follow him, just as they had on Chondax, on Phemus, on Ullanor, and this time it would not be easy.

'It is left to us, brothers. The time for arguments has passed – they have made their move, so we are compelled to make ours. We are hemmed in, and our space is diminishing. We must act. We must defy our orders to ensure that the Legion remains free.'

He took a long breath. Now it came.

'Brothers, Hasik Noyan-Khan has control of the *Swordstorm*. From there he controls the Legion in the Khagan's absence. He must not be allowed to make the decision for us. That is why I have called you here. It means assuming the mantle of renegades, at least in the eyes of those who now seek to subvert us. It means taking up arms against our own brothers. You do not need me to tell you that no such rebellion has ever occurred inside the White Scars. We risk our honour, and may pay for it with our lives.'

Shiban clutched the hilt of his glaive tightly.

'I cannot demand this of you. We will not be fighting xenos – these are our own people. All I can do is ask you to trust me. I have led you across the arc of the galaxy in the cause of the Great Crusade. We have brought compliance to hundreds of worlds and given honour to the name "White Scar". You followed me then. Brothers, you have heard what I judge to be true.'

He paused for a heartbeat.

'Will you follow me now?'

There was no hesitation. There were no sidelong glances or mutterings of discontent. As one, the Brotherhood of the Storm raised their blades. Five hundred glaives, tulwars and power mauls rose into the air. With a crackle, disruptor fields snapped into blue-edged life.

'*Khagan!*' they roared in unison, and the sound of it resounded from the high, vaulted ceiling of the chamber.

Shiban raised his own weapon in salute, his hearts beating hard. The moment had come, the choice had been made. There could be no going back now.

'*Khagan!*' the warriors roared again, brandishing their weapons in ritual tribute. Shiban stood before them, his glaive angled over them, relishing their unshakeable loyalty.

'So there you have it, khan,' said Jochi over the vox, sounding both impressed and wary. 'You have started your war.'

'We did not start it,' replied Shiban grimly. 'But we will make it ours yet.'

NINETEEN

Restoration
Brotherhood of the Storm
The cloud breaks

The earth rumbled under the Khan's feet. Ever since he had arrived in the Reflecting Caves the tremors had been getting worse. Cracks snaked up the vast walls of the cavern, showering more dust onto an already choked floor. Tunnel mouths dotted the perimeter; some of them still adorned with their old ceremonial archways, some dissolved into rubble.

So there are *ways back up*, he thought.

He paced, first away from the seated Magnus, then back towards him. A blend of emotions battled away within him – anger, mostly, but also guilt.

'I should have gone with you to Nikaea,' he said.

Magnus looked equivocal. 'Perhaps. That was the beginning of our censure. But I don't know if you'd have helped, Jaghatai. How many of our brothers trust you more than me?'

'Horus ordered me away,' said the Khan.

'Did he?'

'There are no accidents here. I was kept away. I am sure of it.' He felt like breaking something. 'It should have been the three of us – the Angel, you and me.'

Magnus sighed. 'It's done, brother. Leave it. All that matters now is the future.'

'There is no future!' the Khan snapped, half raising his blade.

Magnus looked at the dao's edge with a strange expression. 'We were working for something better than... this.'

'Were we? Guilliman, perhaps. Lorgar too, in his own warped way. But you weren't – you were there for the hunt.'

'It kept us pure.'

'It kept you *away*.' Magnus smiled. 'You were so easy to keep out of the conversation. I was there the whole time – I just didn't hear the words being whispered.'

The Khan stared hard at him, feeling an edge of sickness in the pit of his stomach. 'Where *are* you, Magnus?' he asked. 'This isn't you.'

Just as he had done before, Magnus paused. He looked around him, as if seeing something different to what the Khan was seeing.

'I am not whole,' Magnus breathed. 'I am no longer bound in place. I am… distributed.'

'We used to talk of daemons. Yaksha. You told me they were just dreams, and not to worry, for human ingenuity was the cure for all ills.'

Magnus shook his head, looking troubled. 'Did I say that?'

'Are you become a yaksha, brother?'

Magnus's eye snapped up to his. 'Maybe I have. Or something like one. There is a price, you see, for bargains. They do not let you forget.' His forehead wrinkled as he concentrated. 'I see a mirror world to this one. I see coal-black rock. I see a sky lit with sorcerous fire. I am there, I think. That is where my self resides. All that remains here, on the world that raised me, is an echo.' His countenance hollowed in distress. 'How many echoes are there, on other worlds, in other places?'

The Khan started to move, to circle slowly, keeping the blade's tip between him and the apparition.

‘Yesugei told me you were too enamoured of the warp,’ he said, trying not to let his sense of revulsion get the better of him. ‘You let it make you sick. It was a *tool*, Magnus. It can be used, but only carefully. Limit yourself, I said.’

Magnus nodded miserably. ‘I remember.’

‘Take the modest amount. Sip at the cup but leave the dregs – this is the lore of Chogoris. You, even *you*, laughed at that.’

Magnus’s mouth curled in a half-sneer. ‘Chogoris,’ he muttered. ‘So proud of your home world. Nothing on Mundus Planus but emptiness.’

‘It made us, just as Prospero made you. Cthonia made Horus, and Caliban made the Lion. We are not just the sons of the Emperor – we were the sons of twenty worlds, each as different as jewels.’

‘You know, of course, that Nostramo is already ashes. Olympia lies in ruins, and the Lion’s home world is headed the same way. You can see what happened to mine. What, do you suppose, will stop Chogoris being consumed in the fire?’

‘All things pass.’

Magnus looked scornful. His face seemed to be distorting, as if locked underwater. ‘Change. That is the only constant. Change, change, change.’

He got to his feet, shakily, reaching to the carcass of his great telescope to steady himself.

‘I’m glad you came to see me, Jaghatai. We always saw eye-to-eye, you and me. You were brittle, but at least you spoke the truth. Unlike that bastard Russ. Do you *know* what he is, underneath? Do you have any idea what Leman Russ really hides inside those furs and totems? Here’s a clue – his Space Wolves have to cover their every axe blade with runes, lest they scream their nightmares into the void. Is that *natural?*’

The Khan held his ground, tensing. ‘Enough, brother.’

Magnus laughed. ‘You don’t want to know? That’s always been your weakness. I know it all, now. I could tell you the Emperor’s name, and it would surprise you. I could tell you that the fates decreed Fulgrim to be sent to Chogoris and you to Chemos, and I could tell you which arcane force in the universe prevented it.’ He took a step, then another, towards the Khan. ‘Do you wish to know where you will die, *Khagan*? Do you wish to know on what world, and in which dimension, your soul will find its ending?’

‘These things are not known.’

‘All is known.’

The Khan looked at him warily. ‘You told me I had a choice. My fate – all fate – is still to be written.’

Magnus grinned. His eye seemed to be weeping, though it was hard to tell whether it was with tears or blood. ‘Stories may meander, but the endings never change. Believe me, I have witnessed the authors.’ He shuddered. ‘They are *terrible*,’ he whispered.

By now he was only inches away from the sword.

‘I have what I came for, brother,’ said the Khan. ‘You can only give me one piece of knowledge that I truly desire.’

Magnus inclined his head. ‘And what is that?’

‘How to restore you.’

Magnus started. For a moment he looked truly bewildered, as if he had expected mockery and received sincerity, or perhaps the other way around. He looked down at his hands, then around at the devastation of his kingdom. Misery mingled with confusion.

‘I am corrupted,’ he whispered, as if realising it all over again. ‘Restore me, and I shall become a lord again. I shall be the Crimson King, free to rule over a world of spells and vengeance. The galaxy may live to rue that.’

‘You were my friend,’ said the Khan, quietly.

Magnus looked at him, and for a moment, just a moment, the old dignity was there, etched upon a ravaged face and glimmering in the dark.

‘Then,’ he said, ‘I judge you know what to do.’

The Khan nodded, and pulled his sword round for the strike. Slivers of witch-light skittered along the rune-wound steel.

‘Until we meet under starlight,’ he promised.

‘Sooner than you might think,’ said Magnus, making no effort to evade the blow.

The Khan swung, and the dao glittered through the air, whispering as it came. When it hit Magnus’s outline, the ghostly shell shattered, spilling into a thousand pieces like broken glass. A wild crack rang out, a steely snap, followed by a shriek like a child’s cry. The dust around him billowed up in a cloud, swirling and writhing. The Khan was momentarily blinded, and staggered back.

The ground trembled, a low rumbling broke out from deep within the earth. What remained of the brass instruments danced and shivered, and the broken lens-pieces skittered across the bare rock.

Then, slowly, the tumult subsided. The phantasmal light faded away, followed by the howl of unnatural wind. After that, all that remained were the broken things of Magnus’s creation, now sunk into real-shadow, forlorn and battered by the maelstrom.

The Khan stayed where he was for a moment, breathing heavily. The hollowness still plagued him – the numb feeling of having discovered the full extent of treachery.

There is only one unforgivable lie.

His hearts beat sluggishly. His blade felt leaden in his fist.

That is the lie that says, this is the end, you are the conqueror, you have achieved it and now all that remains is to build walls higher and shelter behind them. Now, the lie says, the world is safe.

The Khan bowed his head.

All emperors are liars.

He remained still, as gaunt and lean as a hunting hound, his cloak hanging stiffly about him. He did not move. He felt as though moving, even by a fraction, might break what remained. Around him, the Reflecting Caves sighed with emptiness, their majesty in tatters.

At least, amidst all the numbness, the truth was now known. The choice could be made, for the traitor had been unmasked.

Duty could now be done, the call to war could be given.

But, for all that, still he did not stir.

The dream had died.

Ilya glanced up towards Hasik's position, and nothing she saw gave her any reassurance.

She looked around at the bridge, as if for the first time, watching the multitudes at work, trying to see if any of them were as unnerved as she was. The *Swordstorm*'s command nexus was a truly colossal space, big enough to accommodate the hundreds of crew responsible for monitoring and guiding the battleship into combat. Its ridged walls soared away on either side of a cavernous interior, each one studded with terraces glowing brightly from the light of picter-screens. Lumen-banded pillars five metres in diameter thrust up from the marble floor, terminating in the far distance of the vaulted ceiling. A whole series of platforms ran away from her vantage, each one housing a different cluster of White Scars officer-serfs or Mechanicum tech-priests.

The entire space was dominated by the enormous arch over the far observation deck. Prospero's horizon-curve was visible through the armourglass, dark as smoke and angry with snarled cloud cover. Lightning ran across the upper atmosphere, like dancing tongues of silver.

Ilya swept her gaze back to Hasik. He was busy at a sensor-pillar under the arch, surrounded by glimmering hololiths and gesturing incessantly. Servitors and mortal crew scurried to comply with whatever orders he was giving them – dozens came and went, bowing and proffering data-slates.

Halji stood beside her, saying nothing, sunken into an expectant silence.

Ilya turned to her own screens. Ships were still moving out of the deployment pattern. The *Qo-Fian* had withdrawn to the far side of the planet. Two smaller frigates had broken off contact entirely after a series of strange vox-bursts.

She ran an augur sweep, and it was then that she first saw them: four large ships, heading in-system fast. They looked to be just minutes out of maximum resolution, and their auspex profiles still scattered the feed with interference. It was possible that they would be accompanied by smaller vessels, too, as yet invisible to the fleet's sensors.

'Have you seen this, Halji?' she asked, pointing to the rune-glyphs.

Halji nodded. 'Incoming ships.'

'They have no identifiers,' said Ilya, frowning. 'They're big. Throne, they're battleships.'

'It is under control.'

'It's not bloody well under control!' Ilya felt like hammering her fists on Halji's armour. He was so *calm*, so unconcerned. 'You're sitting around like you've…'

She did not say *'arranged it yourself'*.

She glanced up at Hasik again. He was surrounded by two dozen White Scars in heavy battleplate, stationed around the edge of the observation deck like an honour guard. The noyan-khan showed no signs of surprise, nor did anyone around him.

'We have to raise shields,' she said firmly.

'That is the noyan-khan's decision.'

'It's *procedure*.'

Halji avoided looking at her.

Ilya thumped her fist into the pict-feed and felt it flex. 'Damn you, Halji! What's going on?'

Halji shook his head. 'Calm yourself, szu. All will become apparent.'

He was like a rockcrete wall. With a sudden lurch of realisation, she realised that Halji was not her ally and her guide; he was her chaperone. She could no more have escaped his attention than she could outrun a jetbike.

She whirled back to the nearest screen, her cheeks burning with anger. Runes swam across the console before her, each one indicating a ship shifting out of position.

'Where is the Khan?' she muttered, her fingers dancing across the controls.

The four ship-signals kept tracking across the void, heading with remorseless efficiency towards the White Scars formations. Just as at Chondax, the entire fleet seemed incapable of responding to them.

She ran an augmented sweep on the signals, pulling them to a different monitor. Grainy images resolved. It was hard to tell from the distorted profiles, but the ships looked grey. Pale grey, like the images of Luna she had seen so many times on propaganda picts.

She killed the feed, despairing of making sense of it. Then, just as she was about to look away, she detected a familiar signature edging towards the *Swordstorm*. The *Kaljian*, one of the smaller attack-frigates, one of the last she had pulled into muster before the Alpha Legion had attacked. It was not so much drifting into range as… sidling.

Ilya glanced up at Halji, whose attention had shifted to Hasik again. He didn't notice her, and was not checking the pict-feeds.

She almost said something, then changed her mind. The Khan was still out of contact and matters were clearly being run by others – it was up to her to decide who was acting in whose best interests.

She kept her head down. She said nothing. Carefully, trying to remain as calm as possible, she started to work. One by one, the *Swordstorm*'s defensive schematics began to scroll down the console.

Qin Xa hunkered down in the rubble. His targeting system still gave him nothing. The rest of the squad crept through the darkness, hugging close to the twisted heaps of debris. Above them, Prospero's unquiet skies cracked and grumbled.

He could already see the column, standing like a sliver of bone amidst the swirling dust. Just one more barricade to clear, and they would be back in the square.

'In position?' he voxed to Arvida.

'*Whenever you're ready*,' replied the Thousand Sons legionary.

Qin Xa checked the location of his battle-brothers. Eight runes blinked on his retinal display, each within five metres. Bolters were no use, he had decided, so his warriors went into battle with tulwars or glaives or lightning claws, all of them wreathed in the crackling discharge of electric-blue energy fields.

'Stay close,' he warned, slowly turning his two curved blades. 'Secure the pillar, then I will try to get a location reading.'

He broke from cover, loping over the broken terrain and skirting the worst of the wreckage. His squad did the same, streaking out into Prospero's eternal night. They went low, silent, like wolves on the scent.

Arvida took up position in the midst of them. He travelled more stealthily than the Terminators, knowing the terrain perfectly and not hindered by their massive armour-shells. His gauntlets were already glowing with slivers of warp-fire, lighting up his battered crimson plate.

Qin Xa was the first into the square. Its surface was more pitted and treacherous than it had been before, with ravines running across the pockmarked rockcrete and huge areas slumped down into smoking craters. He ghosted across the remains, keeping his blades raised the whole time.

As he went, his blood pumped hard around his system. There was nothing but silence surrounding him. It could have been the underworld itself.

Then, just as the central column drew into range, he heard the first trace of buzzing. He whirled around to see a psychneuein materialise over him, coalescing instantly as if sucked from the atmosphere itself. He saw the trailing limbs, the mandibles clicking, the swollen brain-parts. Just as

before, the creature was translucent and glowing like corpse-gas. It swooped at him, plunging fast, wings blurring.

Qin Xa braced, waiting for the impact. At the last moment he struck upwards, aiming for the narrow waist between thorax and abdomen. The psychneuein blundered blindly into the path of his swords – both blades hit their target, sinking without resistance into aetheric matter. Qin Xa immediately felt the awful draining cold that made his muscles seize and his mind lock.

Then he heard Arvida cry out, and a bolt of something like lightning slammed into the insectoid body. The glowing exoskeleton instantly hardened, solidifying like ice freezing. Chitinous membranes clustered into being, membranes toughened, fluids pumped.

Qin Xa's blades now bit, and he sliced them both crossways. The psychneuein screamed, and its body severed. Sticky residue slapped across Qin Xa's helm. The buzzing became a strangled flail.

By then he was moving again, leaping away from the disintegrating creature's carcass. Other psychneuein had spun into the square and were lurching towards the Terminators with the same eerie blindness as before. This time, when they latched on, Arvida was ready. Positioned in the centre of the squad, he opened his gauntlet and sent bolts of warp-fire crashing into them. When the bolts hit, the half-corporeal creatures crystallised into physicality. Once in that state, the White Scars could take them on.

Qin Xa ran quickly, spinning out of contact with a reeling psychneuein and charging towards another. Just as he crashed into contact, its shell hardened, ready to receive the cut of his energy field. The creature reeled, its abdomen slit open and leaking. Qin Xa pressed the attack, making his blades whirr. He eviscerated it in three savage cuts, snickering the swords in tight switchbacks, slashing the warp beast apart and leaving it in chunks.

He felt a cold rush of satisfaction. This was fighting he could undertake. He was faster than them. He was sharper.

More materialised; first a few, then dozens. The cluster above them became a swarm, all drawn by the presence of live souls encroaching upon their domain. Ever stranger creatures emerged among them: giant scarabs with glossy, outsize shells; towering mantids that scuttled across the rock; vespid-like beasts with engorged twin stings. Prospero's bizarre menagerie of psychic fauna resurrected jerkily around them, shimmering with spectral evanescence. Bloated cranial mounds glowed, multi-faceted eyes glinted sightlessly.

Arvida worked hard, throwing bolt after bolt at the emerging horrors. The White Scars kept fighting, hacking their way towards the pillar, their blades dripping with luminescent ichor. Qin Xa saw Garul plough straight through a newly-solidified psychneuein, his glaive whirring with incredible speed. Ro-Xian ripped a scarab apart with his claws, drenching himself in glistening liquids as the hard shell blew apart.

But the numbers began to tell. As Qin Xa reached the faint shadow of the column one of the wasp-like insectoids came right at him. Arvida was slow to respond, and Qin Xa's blades whipped through nothing. He felt his soul tug agonisingly, and tried to withdraw. The thing pressed into him, sweeping its grotesque stingers around for the kill.

Qin Xa lunged, aiming at the closest curved spike. At the last moment, Arvida cracked a bolt into the wasp's body – one of Qin Xa's blades severed the solidified stinger, the other jutted deep into its thorax. He wrenched both blades outwards, ripping the creature open.

By then more were coming in. Kaghun was gripped by one of the mantids, his soul wrenched from his body before Arvida could react. The warrior's unearthly screams lingered as the diminished squad fought on towards the centre of the square.

The spectres kept on materialising, bursting into ghoulish life from all directions, spilling out of the air. Arvida worked frantically, lighting up the skies with his sorcery, but it was not quick enough.

Still there was no signal – no location reading for the Khan.

Qin Xa moved with all the speed of his heritage, driving the Terminator plate hard and making the servos whine. His blades plunged and darted, evading the glowing forms of the ethereal and stabbing unerringly into the solidified flesh of the corporeal. His mind fixed into a tight vice of concentration – all he saw was the movement, the strikes and the angles, bleeding out of the night like iridescent nightmares.

The warriors of the keshig withdrew into a tight huddle, protecting Arvida even as his witchery allowed them to fight. The broken column reared up at their backs, severed and implacable.

'*We cannot hold for much longer*,' Arvida voxed coolly.

'Stay where you are,' grunted Qin Xa, scything his blades into the path of a scuttling mantid, slicing its limbs open and sending it crashing to the ground. 'He must be close.'

He heard a buzz and spun to his right, decapitating a psychneuein streaking in just above waist height. The blow was judged expertly, but Arvida's warp-craft had not completed properly, and before Qin Xa could pull the swords away he felt the icy pull of the aether.

He jerked away, but too slowly. Another psychneuein came out of the dark, as translucent as smoked glass. It swerved in on Qin Xa.

He had no time. Arvida was now occupied with his own fight, his warriors could not help. With a sudden lurch, Qin Xa knew that he could do nothing to protect himself.

'Khagan!' he roared defiantly, bracing for impact.

The creature blasted apart, spinning into a thousand fragments that sailed high across the ruins. Wing fragments and body parts burned like stars before blazing out, sending a shockwave screaming across the square and making the dust dance. The air itself seemed to rip apart, scattering psychneuein and sending them tumbling.

A tall figure stood on the far side of the annihilated phantasms, silhouetted against the dull burn of Prospero's long death-agony. His sword glowed with aetheric residue, as though dipped in molten iron. His fine armour was crusted with dirt and dust, much of it smouldering red-hot.

The spectres hung back then, their will suddenly wavering. The swarm fell away, rising clear of the new blade in their midst.

For a second, lost in shock, Qin Xa just stared at the newcomer, breathing heavily. Then the armoured figure spoke, and all became clear.

'Leave them, Xa,' growled the Khan, striding after the retreating horrors, his long dao blade shimmering, his armour's trim glinting like newly-mined gold. 'You can't hurt them. I can.'

The Kaljian pulled into strike range, and the shadow of the *Swordstorm* rippled over it. Waiting just inside the open hangar doors, Shiban looked up at the vastness of the hull as it slid through the void, blotting out the stars beyond. He observed the engine housings, the ventral shield generators, the flank lances, all embellished with ornate las-emplacements and close-range cannons.

His brotherhood were mounted and ready. They lined up in ranks on the hangar deck. Five hundred bikes growled and spat as their engines revved to their full pitch.

Sojutsu-pattern voidbikes were larger and more brutal than the Scimitar-class machines, with enclosed thrusters and a far more potent power source. They were more like one-man fighters than speeders, and an armour-sealed White Scars legionary could use them for short bursts in the void just as other Legions used their speeders for atmospheric work.

Shiban leaned back in his saddle, running final checks on the bike's system. Its centre-mounted heavy bolter keyed up and the bracing clamps slid back. He rose above the rockcrete, buoyed by a thrumming layer of grav-repulsion. All around him his brothers did the same, and the hangar filled with the oily stink of thrusters belching smoke.

‘Think they will fire on us?’ voxed Jochi, bobbing alongside him.

‘We find out now,’ replied Shiban, before pressing the throttle down.

His bike leapt forward like a living thing, growling down the long hangar exit ramp, streaking out through the atmospheric shield and into the silent void beyond.

His brotherhood followed close behind. Five hundred bikes shot clear of the *Kaljian*’s hull and dispersed into the vacuum, each one trailing a line of sooty backwash.

Shiban increased speed, and the looming shape of the *Swordstorm* wheeled above him. The bike swayed as he pulled it round, aiming for a run along the near hull-edge and towards the ventral shuttle bays. Huge sensor towers, hanging from the battleship’s underside like stalactites, raced by as he reached full velocity.

The brotherhood tore towards the ingress points, spread out wide, just as if they were horsemen tearing across open grassland. Shiban saw the first set of bay doors race noiselessly towards him, and ran a sensor sweep on the entrance-zone.

‘Blast-shielded,’ he voxed, drawing closer to the hull.

He hurtled further down towards the battleship’s stern, veering between communication nodes and jutting weapon housings. The brotherhood swept past the first docking bay and powered on to the next.

‘*They will all be protected, khan,*’ remarked Jochi calmly. ‘*Are we going to have to fight our way in?*’

Shiban tilted to avoid a massive lance-barrel. ‘If we have to.’

He shot downwards, aiming for the *Swordstorm*’s keel. A thicket of sensor-vanes hung vertically, barring his path, and he picked up speed to clear them.

They did not have long – the sensorium officers on the flagship would already be tracking them, frantically voxing the *Kaljian* to demand why so many flyers had been launched. The window of operation between them taking off and Hasik taking precautions would be measured in seconds.

He pulled under the keel-point, missing the tip of a sensor-vane by a helm’s width and hauling the bike around hard. The far side of the *Swordstorm* yawned away above him, vast and precipitous.

‘Seven hundred metres,’ he voxed, locking on to the next docking bay. ‘Full throttle.’

The brotherhood streaked towards it, hugging the battleship’s hull-plating and swerving between the hundreds of protuberances and snaking trenches.

The first flickers of las-fire blazed past them like shooting stars – barely visible at such extreme velocities. Cannons further up the battleship’s cyclopean flank opened up first, swung back tight against the ship’s side to target the hurtling speeders.

Several found their mark, sending bikes careering into the hull-plating or spinning, thrusters blazing, into the void.

‘*They dare!*’ voxed Jochi, outraged.

Shiban poured on more power, cleaving to the underside of the *Swordstorm* as close as possible. He had hoped, deep down, that his Legion-brothers would not have used their weapons to prevent them from boarding. If they were truly serious, it would take them just a few minutes to obliterate the entire brotherhood.

They cannot mean to do that. Even now, with all that has happened, they cannot mean to do more than warn us off.

The next bank of docking bays was shielded and closed, all of them too heavily buttressed to be blasted through quickly.

‘Spread out,’ he voxed, scanning ahead for a way in. Only seconds remained until the situation would become irretrievable. ‘Use full hull-width, maintain speed.’

He pushed his bike even closer to the ship, grazing the underside of an exhaust vent and nearly

clipping a power conduit. The las-fire picked up, finding its range and growing in density. The gunners were good, and well used to tracking objects at high velocity. More bikes exploded, tumbling through the void before crashing in silent streaks of igniting promethium. His helm-display flashed red, stabbing at him with the call-signs of the dead.

'Faster,' he snarled, unwilling to pull away. There would be no second chance.

His brothers knew it, and followed his lead tightly. Their engines flared in the dark, burning almost beyond their tolerances.

'*Khan,*' voxed Jochi through gritted teeth. For the first time, he sounded unsure. '*When do we–*'

Then Shiban saw it on his helm-display – a single docking port, un-shielded, un-barred.

'That's it – follow me in,' Shiban ordered, swinging his bike upwards and kicking on towards the signal. He tore through the oncoming hail of las-fire, jerking and ducking to avoid the beams, sweeping past a whole row of angled torpedo launchers and streaking towards the signalled port.

He had no idea why it was unprotected, but it saved them the ruinous task of trying to blast an entrance. Its marker lights were on, strobing into the open jaws of the docking chamber, beckoning them in – as though someone on the flagship actively *wanted* them to break the cordon.

Shiban kicked the retros at the last moment, skidding around in zero-gravity then powering into the *Swordstorm*'s inertia bubble. His bike's grav-plates whined instantly, adjusting to the rapidly moving environment, before locking on to the docking bay floor and righting him.

Shiban slewed into the chamber beyond, swinging his bike about and decelerating hard. The hangar stretched off around him, almost empty save for a few Arvus landers and a bulk shuttle held in place by docking clamps. He could already hear warning klaxons sounding.

The brotherhood followed him in, dropping to the deck as they swooped under the docking bay roof. The riders killed their engines, leaping from the saddle before the last of the roaring had died down, and their mounts coasted to a steaming standstill.

Shiban kicked his bike away and sped for the doors at the far end, drawing his glaive from his back as he ran. The energy field spat into life.

'To me!' he roared, noting how many life sign runes were streaming through the hangar. More than two hundred had already broken through; many more were coming in.

Jochi reached him, sprinting hard, bolt pistol in one hand and tulwar in the other. 'Command bridge lock,' he voxed to the rest of his brethren. 'Nineteen levels up.'

Shiban nodded, reaching the exit ramp and powering up it towards a huge pair of half-open blast-doors.

'We'll be there in no time,' he grinned.

The last of the psychneuein disappeared into the ruins, leaving nothing but ghostly trails of witch-light over burned-out buildings. The Khan watched them go. His blade ran with luminous ichor, dripping in teardrop clumps to the dust. Dozens of carcasses littered the earth around him, some still twitching in jerky displays of insect agony.

Killing them had been straightforward enough. It was a matter of belief, as much as anything: attuning himself to the potential that existed within him, just as it did in all of his brothers. They were, every one of them, creatures of the warp, whatever Malcador told the masses and whatever Russ or Angron might like to believe about themselves.

It runs in our minds like blood in a vein.

Qin Xa and the surviving keshig warriors gathered around him. As he turned to acknowledge them, the Khan noticed more silver flashes running along the horizon. The rumble of thunder had grown louder during his absence. The clouds were racing now, jostling like herds of aduun on the stampede.

Qin Xa bowed. 'Khagan, are you–'

‘Do you have a fix on the *Swordstorm*?’ the Khan asked, glancing back up at the unquiet skies. He could sense the static in them, laced with strands of vivid aether-essence.

‘Not yet.’

The Khan turned back, and caught sight of the Thousand Sons legionary among the others. For a terrible moment he thought that it was Ahriman – he wore the same crimson armour and bore the same arcane sigils.

‘You,’ he said. ‘Who are you?’

The sorcerer bowed. ‘Revuel Arvida, lord. Fourth Fellowship.’

The Khan regarded him. He could see the vigour of the psychic soul glowing inside him like a candle-flame – weakened by privation, but still vivid.

‘You are the last?’

‘As far as I know,’ said Arvida. ‘Unless–’

‘There is nothing down there,’ the Khan said. ‘Not any more.’

‘Did you find what you were looking for?’ asked Qin Xa.

The Khan thought on that. It was hard to know what to say. He had never known what he was looking for, in truth. He had hoped, as had always happened in the past, that the quarry would fall into view before him, leaping away on the edge of sight, poised for him to run down. Now that he had ended the chase, though, it was hard to decide what kind of thing had been encountered.

‘I know more than I did,’ he said.

‘Then who is the traitor?’

The Khan smiled bleakly. ‘Everything we were told was the truth. This world bears the kill-mark of Russ, just as we were told, but Magnus had already fallen, just as we were told. Behind them all stands Horus, the Lord of Primarchs.’ He looked up into the skies. ‘They were all to blame. There is no one traitor – there is only a web, stretching back in time, clutching at us all. And now it comes for us.’

Above the column, the clouds began to glow. A vibrant shard of light speared down from the smog, crackling as it hit the stone below.

The Terminators turned to face it, powering up their weapons. Qin Xa stepped in front of the Khan. Only Arvida remained unmoved.

‘I have felt him following us for a long time,’ murmured the Khan, watching the energy lash and snake. Plumes of dust blew up, snarling in electric arcs and making the air hum with static. ‘He has been on my heels since Ullanor. He has finally caught up.’

The keshig moved into a loose semicircle, poised to strike. None of them would move before the order was given, though; they were the extension of the Khan’s will.

‘Do not try to prevent him,’ said the Khan calmly, watching dark shapes solidify within the raging wall of light. ‘He is beyond all of you. How could he not be? He is my brother.’

TWENTY

Blindsided
All the time in the universe
Running out of friends

Hasik watched the augur readings with a growing sense of unease.

'Are you sure?' he demanded, swinging around to face Taban. 'Can there be no mistake?'

'I do not think so, noyan-khan,' replied the sensorium master, peering intently at the lenses clustered around him. 'I am as surprised as you. But I will check, to eliminate the possibility of error.'

Hasik turned to Goghal, commander of his keshig.

'What of the fleet?'

'The *Qo-Fian* is moving to engage them. I cannot make contact with the bridge. Hibou is not responding from the *Tchin-Zar*. I have reports of disorder on many vessels now.'

Hasik exhaled irritably. 'We do not have time for this.'

Goghal looked over his shoulder briefly. Far away, back down in the depths of the lower bridge, the Terran woman was still working hard at her station.

'The *Kaljian* has landed boarders. Even here, my lord, we are not–'

'Shiban's ship?'

'I believe so.'

'Open a vox-link to the incoming flotilla,' ordered Hasik. 'Prevent any of our vessels from opening fire on them. This is the moment – we hold here, we wait here.'

He turned to the dozens of White Scars around him. They were khans, captains, senior ship-officers and mortal commanders – just a few of those who had been persuaded and who were now working to free the Legion from the hand of tyranny. Some, like Taban, were members of the flagship's crew; others had come with him from the *Tchin-Zar.* They remained resolute. They had no choice.

'Incoming vessels are not responding,' replied Goghal quietly.

Hasik cursed. 'Why not?'

'I have run repeat scans,' interjected Taban. 'There was no mistake. Teleportation was detected. Locus fixed on Tizca.' He looked up at Hasik. 'They appear to have gone direct to the source.'

Hasik felt his frustration rising. This was not what had been arranged. 'Can we get a fix? Can we send down–'

Klaxons suddenly burst out across the bridge, echoing in the high vaults. White Scars warriors all around the key stations locked their bolters and began to move towards the many entrances.

'Boarding party approaching, noyan-khan,' reported Goghal, drawing his own weapon from its holster. His voice was almost reproachful. 'Orders to repel?'

Hasik cast his eye over the command bridge. For all its size, it was stuffed with throngs of bodies – menials, station operators, Space Marine squads, tech-priests. Hundreds of them, all at his command. At the heart of it was his own keshig, the unbreakable retinue of Terminator-clad veterans. Just like the Khagan.

A lone brotherhood posed no real risk – they had run the calculations. But still, he had hoped to avoid full-scale combat in persuading others to the honourable course. Perhaps that had always been a foolish hope.

'We are secure here,' said Hasik coldly. 'Tell them to hold the enemy at the entry points.'

Goghal bowed. ‘And what of… them?’

Hasik turned back to the arch of the massive observation portal. He could see them with his own eyes now – four grand warships, each clustered with escorts, burning towards them out of the glare of Prospero’s sun. They were moving slowly but purposefully, a far cry from the disruption sweeping across the White Scars fleet.

‘They are not Sixteenth Legion, noyan-khan,’ said Goghal.

‘I can see that.’

Why did they not make contact? Why the silence?

‘This is the test, brothers,’ Hasik announced, turning back to the warriors around him. Even as he did so, he heard the first hard bangs of bolter-fire echoing in the levels below. ‘This is what we have been working towards.’

He drew his own blade, the Chogorian tulwar that he had borne into battle since the first days of the Crusade.

‘It cannot be halted now,’ he said. ‘For the sake of the Imperium, *no backward step*.’

Shiban burst into the corridor, running hard. A dozen of his warriors flanked him, and they raced along together, followed closely by the rest of the brotherhood.

Menials pressed against the walls to let them pass, wide-eyed with shock. Warning klaxons rang tinnily, followed by ship-wide emergency warnings. Many of the ship’s crew were armed with las-weapons, but had nothing that could stop several hundred primed and armoured White Scars on the rampage. The brotherhood pushed up, deck after deck, not encountering any resistance that they could not sweep aside with unconscious ease.

Near the end, Shiban broke into one of the halls below the bridge level: a vast space with curving marble walls and banks of glowing sensor lenses. Hundreds of tech-priests and mortal officers scattered ahead of him, breaking like herds of prey before a hunters’ arrowhead formation. He did not even see their faces – they passed him in a blur. Ranks of cogitator logic engines swept by, as tall as Warhounds and steaming from superheated valves and transistor-columns.

As he sprinted clear of the last of them, the first hammering salvo of bolter-fire cracked into the walls around him.

He skidded to a halt, dropping low and scanning for the source of the incoming shots. A wide staircase ran away from him, less than twenty metres ahead, ascending steeply to the far end of the hall. Terraces radiated along the walls on either side of it, all stuffed with servitor-stations.

Halfway up the staircase, on a colonnaded landing area, a line of White Scars waited. They were well-established, already crouched in fire-positions and able to shelter behind the curve of the pillars around them. Beyond them lay the approaches to the strategium and bridge.

Their commander did not make any attempt to stay in cover. He strode to the forefront, bolter in one hand, power sword in the other.

‘Go no further, brothers!’ he shouted, and his vox-amplified voice echoed around the hall. ‘That is enough. We will fire if you force us.’

Shiban looked up at him, and his heart sank.

It was Torghun.

The Terran had come with at least the majority of his brotherhood – two hundred detectable, surely many more remaining out of sight.

‘This cannot go on,’ replied Shiban, holding position. Behind him, his forces advanced slowly under the cover of the logic engines. ‘You are not the master of this Legion, Torghun.’

‘Nor are you, brother,’ Torghun replied, gazing down at him from his vantage. ‘The bridge is sealed.’

‘What of the Khagan?’

‘Hasik speaks for the Khagan.’

Shiban felt his blood run hot. No one, not even the Emperor himself, spoke for the Great Khan.

‘It is not just me,’ Shiban voxed. ‘Others will resist, all across the fleet. The Legion will not take Hasik’s lead.’

‘They will come around,’ said Torghun, though he sounded almost as if he were working to convince himself. ‘They will see it, just as the Khagan will when he returns.’

Shiban examined the stairway approach. It would be difficult – the defenders had the height advantage, and the cover advantage.

But did they truly believe in this? Would they hold the line for Hasik in the way that they would for the Khagan?

‘You can still withdraw,’ voxed Shiban. ‘I know you, brother – this is not why you joined them. You never intended it. Lower your blades. This is no longer about loyalty. It is over.’

Torghun only hesitated for a fraction of a second, just a mere fragment of a chrono-slice, hardly detectable. Still, he hesitated.

‘I have my orders, Shiban,’ he said defiantly. ‘Come no further. We *will* fire on you.’

Shiban nodded grimly. He transmitted a silent command to his brotherhood, over the comm.

Go swiftly. Go surely. We do this for the Khagan.

‘Then I am sorry, brother,’ Shiban voxed, clutching his glaive two-handed and tensing for the charge. ‘Believe me, I am.’

Now.

With a deafening roar, the Brotherhood of the Storm burst out of cover and surged up the stairway, charging into the incoming torrent of bolter-shells as the hall exploded with light, sound and fury.

The Khan watched the last of the warp energies tear away. He watched the ash settle and the residual snags of aether-burn ripple into nothing. Then he watched seven figures within the maelstrom emerge.

Six of them were legionaries. They were clad in pale, thick-slabbed Terminator armour and carried huge reaper-scythes. Their pauldrons were olive-green and the links between the plates were cold iron. They were massive, heavier-set than Qin Xa’s retinue, hunched at the shoulder and leaking pale green vapour from the last of the teleportation beams.

The seventh occupied a different order of power. He towered over them, clad in plate of bare brass and corpse-white ceramite. A long cloak of dark green hung down from high-rimmed shoulder guards. Skulls dangled from chains about his belt, some human, some xenos. A long pistol nestled among them – drum-barrelled and studded with bronze kill-markers.

His eyes were amber, glinting from under the deep shadow of a tattered cowl. An ornate rebreather covered the lower half of his face. Coils of oily gas spilled from the lining of his battleplate, dribbling down the skull-painted surfaces and hissing on contact with Prospero’s death-dry soil.

Tubes running from the rebreather mask gurgled with fluids. His breath came in clogged wheezes.

‘Jaghatai,’ said the primarch Mortarion, planting the heel of his enormous scythe into the dust.

The Khan looked up at the blade. It was known as *Silence*, the greatest of the XIV Legion’s infamous manreapers.

‘Mortarion,’ the Khan replied, nodding in acknowledgement. ‘This is not your world.’

‘Nor yours. And yet here we both are.’

Mortarion’s honour guard – the Deathshroud – spread out silently across the ash. Qin Xa’s warriors fell into a mirror formation. The two forces faced one another, just a few metres apart. Above them, the lightning rippled and the thunder growled.

The Khan felt his muscles tense. ‘If you came for Magnus, he is no longer here.’

‘I came to find *you*, brother. Things have changed.’

‘You noticed.’

Mortarion smiled behind his mask, making his mottled cheeks crease. ‘I have plenty to tell you, Jaghatai. There are opportunities here. The cost of error has never been higher – the rewards, beyond imagination.’

The Khan observed him guardedly. Mortarion had always been hard to read.

‘You are here to persuade me, then?’ he asked. ‘You think, after all this, there are any more arguments to be made?’

Mortarion reached up with his left hand and pushed his cowl back. A pallid grey scalp was revealed, though it still bore the noble countenance of the gene-brotherhood. Deep bags nested under his sharp eyes, and wisps of gas rose up from the collar about his neck.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘Just listen. You might learn something. Even you, my proud brother, can still be tutored.’

The Khan left his blade unsheathed, holding it loosely by his side.

Mortarion’s power seemed to have grown. Something burned in him, dark like old embers. His flesh was somehow bleaker, his stance a little more crabbed, and yet the aura of intimidation around him had been augmented. Back on Ullanor, even at the height of triumph, he had not had quite the same heft.

The Khan recalled his brother’s words.

Then what would be the wager on us, brother? What would you pay, if we fought?

‘Say what you came to say,’ said the Khan.

Mortarion bowed, half mockingly.

‘I have travelled a long way to find you,’ he rasped. ‘And now, look around – we have all the time in the universe. All we have left to disturb us are the dead, and they do not stir.’

He smiled again, as mirthless and dry as before.

‘Yet.’

Shiban shouldered into a brother-legionary, sending him staggering back up the wide marble steps. He spun his glaive, sweeping it through the air crossways and cracking the bolter free of the stricken defender’s gauntlets. Then he plunged it down, punching the blade-tip through his victim’s armour cabling and severing the oxygen feed.

Torghun’s warrior gagged, tearing at his throat, and rolled across the steps into the path of Shiban’s charging brotherhood.

The volume of fire was horrific: even running at speed, darting and ducking as they came, dozens had been cut down. The bolt-shells cracked hard into ceramite plate, ripping it apart and sending legionaries flying backwards.

Right up until the order to charge had been given, Shiban had not been sure they would really open fire. Torghun had been as good as his threat, though, and his warriors had done their duty.

The Brotherhood of the Storm surged up against the hammering deluge, sprinting in loose formation. For every one of them knocked back, ten more gained ground. Soon they were up amidst the colonnades and the fighting switched to close range. Brother locked blades with brother, and the echoing din of bolter-fire was joined by the acrid snarl of energy weapons.

Shiban turned to face another defender, given away by the moon icon upon his pauldron but otherwise almost indistinguishable from any other warrior in the melee. They locked blades in a flurry of vicious strokes – Shiban whirled his guan dao, blurring the disruptor trail, before jabbing it straight ahead, impaling the warrior under the breastplate. He wrenched the blade deep, twisting it into

the flesh beneath before yanking it clear.

If the enemy had been a greenskin, he would have kept going – carving into the organs, making sure – but these were his brothers. He had no wish to kill if it could be avoided – he immobilised, shattered bones, throttled and bludgeoned, then moved on, sprinting further up through the throng of warriors towards the summit.

The fighting was bizarre – close-packed, frenzied, confused and brutal, but strangely detached. No fighter whooped or cried out in battle-cant. They fought with a cold discipline, going through the movements with consummate skill but taking no joy in it.

We have become wretched, thought Shiban as he powered up through the press of bodies, twisting, punching, lashing out. *We have become what we once hated.*

He thrust upwards, smashing a defender out of his path with a haymaker from his gauntlet.

'You always went too fast, brother,' came a familiar voice from above.

Shiban ducked, feeling the blade-swipe lash across him. He dropped to one knee before driving upwards again, glaive extended.

Torghun was too quick, evading the disruptor point and parrying with his power sword. The blades crackled together in a storm of energy-auras before leaping apart.

'What did they promise you?' snarled Shiban, coiling for another strike.

Torghun thrust first, handling his tulwar with suitably impressive dexterity. They clashed again, exchanging a flurry of heavy blows before springing back apart.

'Nothing,' he grunted. 'It's about loyalty.'

Shiban pressed the assault, using his glaive's reach to batter Torghun onto the back foot. '*Loyalty?*'

Torghun countered at speed. Sparks showered across his armour as the energy fields snarled and burned. 'Horus is the Warmaster. Why do you resist it?'

Then he broke free of the sequence of blows and launched his own strike, ducking around the glaive and angling in low.

'That is not enough,' gasped Shiban, only just blocking the strike and nearly losing his footing. All around them, warriors grappled and cut, blasted and blocked, gripped in a hundred duels of their own. Shattered masonry flew from the architraves above them, smashed loose by bolter-fire. 'You know it. You've been used.'

Torghun fell back, retreating a pace up the stairs to give himself room, and Shiban went after him.

'Used?' Torghun scoffed, incredulous. 'Where is the Emperor, brother? Where are the Legions at his side? Look at the world below – look at it!'

Shiban crashed into contact again, swinging the glaive in a tight arc and hammering against Torghun's defence. Together, they rocked and swayed, climbing steadily, surrounded by the tumult of combat. The summit of the stairway drew closer. With a burst of exhilaration, Shiban saw that they were forcing the defenders back.

'Give this up,' urged Shiban. 'You can still call it off.'

Torghun fell back again, reaching the landing beyond and letting Shiban come to him. Bolter-fire hammered out again, launched from positions further up, hidden against the pillars and terraces of the bridge's main antechamber.

As always, Torghun had organised his defences well – there were layers after layers, each harder to breach than the last.

'I have my orders,' Torghun said again, repeating the words with the same growl of defiance. By then he stood at the entrance to the antechamber, covered by bolter fire-arcs and flanked by his steadily retreating brotherhood, sword held in guard, stance resolute.

It was hard not to admire his conviction. Shiban had always noted the way that the Terrans fought in defence – steadfast, gritty, bloody-minded.

There were things to learn, even in the heart of the madness.

'Damn your orders!' Shiban roared, rousing his warriors for the final push. 'For the Khagan!'

With an answering wave of aggression, they surged up the final incline, sweeping over the lip of the stairs and into the new storm. Torghun held position, and the two of them slammed back into the duel, blades whirling in a storm of flaring disruptors.

Mortarion took a few steps towards the Khan. Qin Xa moved to intervene, but the Khan gave him a wordless battle-sign, and he retreated with the others. The two primarchs stood alone, shadowed by their respective bodyguards.

Mortarion was a little broader, the Khan a little taller. Mortarion's armour was heavy, almost crude, where the Khan's was fine-wrought. *Silence* was a gigantic weapon forged from a chunk of adamantium and glittering with archeotech fixings; the Khan's dao was a slender, perfectly curved piece of flawless metal, deriving its strength from its form rather than its size. It could be made to move faster than any blade in the Imperium.

Speed against implacability. An interesting contest.

'You were not meant to be here,' said Mortarion. 'You were meant to join the Alpha Legion at Alaxxes.'

The Khan nodded. 'Or return to Terra.'

'We did not wish that. Why would we?'

'The Alpha Legion held us at Chondax. They wanted us to hear from Dorn.'

Mortarion raised a hairless eyebrow. 'Indeed? You surprise me, but perhaps you shouldn't. It seems that Alpharius is never wholly of one mind.' He chuckled darkly. 'He plays a dangerous game. His own intrigues will throttle him.'

'So why you?' asked the Khan.

'Why *not* me, brother?'

'I assumed it would be Horus.'

'Vanity. He has many things to keep him busy.'

The Khan's eyes narrowed. Mortarion did not seem too sure of himself. For all the show, all the projected force, he was on shaky ground. 'Horus didn't send you, did he?'

'That means nothing.'

'It means everything,' said the Khan, studying his brother's reaction. 'Magnus told me how the war stands – some souls are still to be decided on. There were always those of us on the edge. I was one, you were another.'

Mortarion snorted. 'My Legion was at Isstvan, so put aside any thoughts that we are not committed. The outcome is already determined, and your choice is simple – preservation or destruction. Come, Jaghatai, you've never even believed in Unity. You saw through it even when Guilliman was lecturing us all to tears, back when there were still xenos standing between our father and the galaxy's edge.'

'Then tell me the alternative.'

'A galaxy of warriors,' said Mortarion. 'A galaxy of *hunters*, where the strong are given their freedom. A galaxy in which there is no dead hand at the tiller, constraining us, lying to us.'

'And all this led by Horus.'

Mortarion shrugged. 'He's the start. He is the champion, the sacrificial king. He may burn himself out to get to Terra, he may not. Either way, there will be room for others to rise.' Mortarion drew closer, and the Khan smelled the chemical tang of his armour. 'You should never have thrown your lot in with the Angel, brother, let alone Magnus. I hated to see it, the three of you, getting dragged in deeper. I always thought you'd break away, see through it, get tired of the hypocrisy.'

'They were never hypocrites.'

‘No?’ Mortarion exhaled a parched laugh. ‘I hoped you’d have understood them sooner. It’s the *warp*, Jaghatai. Our father tried to pretend it wasn’t there, as if he weren’t already up to his elbows in its soul-sucking filth. It should have been cordoned off, put away, forgotten about. It’s not *for* us. It’s a sickness, a *blight*.’

Mortarion became agitated. He calmed down slowly, wheezing through his gas-shrouded mask. The Khan heard a faint hiss, and guessed at what kind of suppressants had been shunted into his bloodstream.

‘I see what has happened,’ he said, quietly.

Mortarion cocked his head. ‘Oh?’

‘You were always sincere, I will give you that,’ said the Khan. ‘You never hid what you wanted. I can guess how you thought it would go. First, hobble the sorcerers. Silence the witches. Drive them out, and rule passes to the uncorrupted. The healthy. That was your great project. You even *told* me of it, that day on Ullanor. I thought back then that they were empty threats, but I should have known. You do not make empty threats.’

As the Khan spoke, Mortarion’s mask-locked expression remained inscrutable. Every so often his eyes would go filmy, or his finger would twitch. There was a kind of febrile energy about him, spilling out of the cracks just as the noxious fumes did.

‘But it has gone wrong, hasn’t it?’ the Khan went on. ‘You have completed your great mission, but there are more sorcerers than ever. Horus has sponsored them, Lorgar has shown them new tricks. If Magnus has not already made up his mind then he soon will, and then you will be surrounded. You’ve destroyed the Librarius only to find the witches are now untrammelled. They played you well. You have done their work for them, and soon you will be dragged into it yourself, as warp-sick as they are.’

‘You think that–’

‘I see it perfectly. Magnus showed me. Your Legion may be free of it for now, but the change will come. You made your pacts, and now they will come to collect. You *fool*.’

Mortarion stiffened. His eyes blazed with anger for a second, quickly quelled. ‘You do not–’

‘And that is why you came to find me,’ said the Khan. ‘You’ve run out of friends. Who will stand with you against the aether-weavers now? Angron? What an ally. Curze? Good luck.’ The Khan gazed at Mortarion disdainfully. ‘You’ve tasted the fruits of treachery and found them bitter. Don’t drag me into your ruin. You’re on your own, brother.’

Mortarion’s expression fractured behind the mask – shifting into an enraged snarl, disfiguring rapidly. *Silence* quivered, and he took half a step forward, his free fist clenching.

‘I came to give you a choice,’ Mortarion said, keeping his voice under control with some difficulty. ‘Half your Legion are already declared for Horus, the others will follow wherever you order them. Our father’s time is over – you can be a part of the order that replaces him.’

The Khan smiled – a cold smile, imperious in its contempt. ‘A new emperor.’

Mortarion glared back at him, though he could not hide the doubt. ‘Why not? Why should it not be you?’

The Khan nodded, finally understanding. ‘Or you. Why not indeed?’ He drew closer, noticing for the first time the discolouration of the skin around the edge of his brother’s rebreather. How long had he worn it? ‘I’ll tell you why. Because we were never the empire-builders. We were the outriders. You chafed at it, I embraced it.’

Mortarion began to back away. As he did so, *Silence* crackled into life, sparking with green-tinged energy. The Deathshroud lowered their scythes in a combat posture.

‘Then you will not be persuaded,’ said Mortarion, his filtered voice sunken into a surly growl. ‘A shame. I invested much energy to save you, brother. I shall take no pleasure in your destruction.’

Behind the Khan, the keshig readied their blades.

‘And there is the difference between you and me,’ said the Khan, moving his dao into guard. ‘By the time I make my kills, I am *always* laughing.’

TWENTY-ONE

To the bridge
The tyrants
Getting your attention

It was poor fighting, cramped and bitter. None of them let loose with the flamboyance that they were used to. Shiban urged his brothers onwards, trying to instil the virtues of greater speed, greater power. Torghun did the same – exhorting those about him into a typically dogged defence.

Neither side relished the carnage. Blood began to splatter across the marble, trodden in and smeared by hundreds of tramping armoured boots. Blades found their mark, cutting between breastplate and pauldron, punching into leather-brown skin and lacerating transhuman organs. The enclosed spaces rang with the peculiar noises of Space Marine combat: amplified roars of aggression, the judder and crash of bolters, the snarl of power weapons clashing.

Shiban and Torghun fought at the heart of it all, feinting and thrusting as they circled one another, each going for the opening just as the other closed it down. Neither had made a mistake – they fought perfectly, each adopting the style of their home world. Torghun was methodical, solid, organised; Shiban was creative, dynamic, persistent.

The Brotherhood of the Moon fought as competently as their khan, but it steadily became apparent they had taken heavier casualties during the initial engagement than the attackers. Despite the early advantage of high ground, they were driven back further into the chambers beyond, step by bloody step, forced up into the bridge's lower antechamber and on across the long hallway beyond.

Shiban fought on, feeling the first spikes of fatigue in his arms and ignoring them. Torghun was not giving up.

'I will never understand it,' Shiban snarled, spinning into contact, pivoting on his left foot to slam the glaive into Torghun's midriff. 'I will never understand *why*.'

'No, you will not,' grunted Torghun, parrying the blow but staggering back. A bolt-round whistled past his shoulder, grazing the pauldron and scarring the half-moon icon.

'You had *everything*,' pressed Shiban. Anger was driving him now, not exuberance. It was a wretched feeling.

Torghun held his ground, working his blade expertly in a figure-of-eight before going back onto the offensive. 'It wasn't mine.' The snatched words carried a taste of resentment. 'None of it was mine.'

His blows became more vicious, and Shiban had to work hard to meet them. Torghun's fury eroded his discipline, though, and Shiban countered hard, nearly stabbing the glaive-point clean into his chest.

'You had whatever you wanted,' said Shiban scornfully, driving him back another few metres. All around him, his brothers were doing the same, fuelled by the greater fervour – they knew exactly where their allegiance lay.

'You know nothing of what I wanted,' said Torghun. 'You could never see beyond Chogoris.'

Shiban laughed – a sour, joyless snort. 'Chogoris is everything, brother.'

Torghun ceded more ground, following the path of his steadily retreating brothers through rows of gothic arches. 'Exactly.'

The fighting surged up a shallow incline, overlooked by vast

chandelier-lumens of gold and glass. Shiban's forces pushed up through the narrowing space, gaining ground with every surge. Many fell to the concentrated volleys of covering fire, their armour pulverised in the withering barrage, but their momentum was not halted. Torghun's forces had lost too many warriors to hold the ground, and now struggled to keep them back.

Shiban drove onwards, beyond the ramp's summit and through the previously sealed doors into the lower reaches of the command hall. The ceiling soared away from them, impossibly high up, studded with glassaic and lit by a thousand suspensor globes. The bridge's hubbub of activity was drowned by the thunder of combat; hundreds of servitors and crew lit up the proximity detectors in Shiban's helm-display. The space opened up before them, packed with bodies that milled like the crowds on a hive-world.

'Secure the tactical stations,' he voxed to his brothers, still fighting hard. 'Keep together. Watch for strikes from the sensor-pits.'

The brotherhood tore out into the main hall, driving the defenders before them in ragged, battered squads. Just as the arch of the observation deck soared away ahead of them, Torghun's forces fell back en masse. Torghun himself broke from combat, the last of the defenders to do so, following his retreating warriors. They all went quickly, decisively, as if the move had been long planned.

Shiban's instinct was to charge after them, cutting them down as they broke. All around him his brothers did the same, sprinting ahead to run the enemy down.

Withdraw, then return.

'No!' Shiban roared, suddenly seeing the danger.

He skidded to a halt, crouching down, just as the hurricane hit. From high up on the terraces on either side of the bridge, lodged many metres up between the pillars and suspended platforms, massed bolter-fire tore up the floor in a cloud of debris. Many of Shiban's warriors, having pursued Torghun's retreating forces too closely, were caught up in the wave of impacts, their armour shredded.

The rest of them retreated to what cover they could – cogitator banks, sensor stations, observation gantries. Shiban made for the shadow of a huge raised platform crowned with brass-framed viewscreens. Just as he did so, the wave of bolter-fire ceased.

Moving carefully, he shifted around the foot of the platform and scanned the area ahead. Torghun's warriors had hunkered down in a long line across the servitor pits bisecting the hall. Dozens of sharp-shooters were stationed above them on the terraces, holding fire for now but still primed. Beyond that, he saw more heavy infantry holding position around the epicentre of the bridge itself – the command throne. Hasik's own keshig were amongst them, hulking in Terminator plate. Other defending White Scars occupied strategic points on the observation deck beyond.

There must have been hundreds in total. The bridge was covered, locked down, utterly secure.

'This is *enough*, khan,' came Hasik's voice from the throne.

Ilya cowered behind her auspex station, hunched low with her hands over her ears. The noise when they had broken in was incredible – a hammering, drumming wall of sound, punctured by vox-augmented roars of belligerence. Space Marines in everyday life were intimidating enough; in combat, they were astonishing.

Halji had broken away from her position as soon as it had happened, rushing up the steps to a vantage point closer to the command dais. He had drawn his bolter and held it two-handed in front of him. Disorientated, thrown by the horrific storm of damage around her, Ilya had hardly noticed him fire, but he had not hesitated for a moment. As though it were the most natural thing in the world, he had opened up on his comrades, joining in the barrage that had sent them reeling backwards and scrambling for cover. It had clearly been arranged – Halji had known that they were coming.

She glanced up, through the damaged remains of her cogitator units and towards the command throne. Hasik looked as stoic as ever, addressing the crouching intruders, trying to get them to stand down.

Ilya's gaze travelled up to the roof-lines. Marksmen had been placed high up the walls. There seemed to be armoured warriors everywhere. The rest of the mortal crew were doing what she was – cowering out of the gunlines, lost in shock.

Ilya crawled over to what remained of her console and stared at the auspex readings. The four incoming warships were drifting closer, utterly incautious, prowling through local space as though they owned it. Now up close, she could see the fleet-markings – XIV Legion, the Death Guard. That seemed as incongruous to her as anything that had happened since the encounters at Chondax.

Had Hasik arranged the rendezvous? If so, why?

Ilya scrabbled to pull up more data from the cracked screens. With Halji out of the way, she could work more quickly.

More ships entered augur range – two of them, burning through the outer system at high speed. No markers, no idents, just sub-warp signatures and the telltale flicker of void shield activation. Ilya stared at the signals for a while, unable to gauge where they had emerged from or what they were doing.

The White Scars fleet was paralysed. Their ships were not moving to counter either threat closing in on them. If what was happening on the *Swordstorm* was taking place on the other warships, then Ilya could see why – the Legion had turned upon itself, as if hidden divisions had suddenly been exposed everywhere at once.

Of course, she had played a part in it. The *Kaljian*'s warriors would have had a harder time getting on board the ship if she had not deactivated the defences over docking bay 567. That had been Halji's fault – she had never liked to resort to deception, whatever the cause.

'Where is the Khagan?' came a shout from the far end of the bridge hall – a Space Marine's voice, filtered through a helm-vox.

It was a good voice – hard, with Chogorian depth to it, but untainted by rancour. Ilya was instantly glad of the choice she had made.

'He will return, Shiban,' Hasik replied. 'This is pointless. We are not traitors – it will all be resolved.'

Traitors. The word chilled her. She remembered what Qin Xa had told her, and the snippets of information she had gleaned from talking to the Khagan.

With a twist in her stomach, she knew what would happen next. The stakes were too high to leave things hanging unresolved – the invaders were going to charge again. This time it would not stop, not until only one faction remained on the bridge, traitor or loyalist, whichever was which.

She couldn't just watch. It would almost certainly be futile, possibly suicidal, but standing idly by had never been her way.

With her palms slick with nervous sweat, Ilya prepared to move.

Hold position, Shiban signalled to his surviving warriors, all pinned down close to where they had burst in at the near end of the hall. *Stay in cover.*

'I have no wish to kill you,' cried Hasik. 'You are out-gunned. Heavily. Let this be an end to it.'

Shiban turned to see Jochi, who was crouched down in the shadow of a pillar a few metres to his right. It looked like he had taken a hit, and was breathing heavily.

'What do you think?' Shiban voxed.

Jochi shook his head. Shiban knew what expression he would be wearing under his helm – a rueful smile. '*Too many*,' he replied.

Shiban nodded. ‘Far too many.’

‘*But you will order it anyway*.’

Shiban ran another sweep of the chamber. They were outnumbered three-to-one, and the defenders were better armed and better placed. It would be a massacre, with no guarantee of getting even halfway to where they needed to be.

But he might at least make it to Hasik. That would be worth something.

‘On my mark,’ he voxed to what remained of his warriors. ‘The throne is the target.’ He heard the slam and click of bolters being reloaded. All around him, his brothers made their final preparations.

‘If we are to die here,’ he added, taking up the glaive again and preparing to burst from cover, ‘then we will die fighting. For the Khan, brothers. *For the Khan.*’

Ilya jumped to her feet, her heart pounding, and ran into the open.

‘No!’ she shouted, ludicrously, as if any of them would pay attention to the sudden intervention of an old woman with no combat training. She stood up, shaking with fear, determined to do *something*. ‘Why are you *doing* this?’

Her words were never heard, not by the assembled White Scars, not even by her.

A deafening roar boomed through the entire bridge, like a starship engine keying up to burn. An eye-burning light blazed, followed by the lash of energy coiling. The iridescence blew out almost as quickly as it had come, leaving clanging echoes in its wake.

Ilya blinked hard, her eyes watering madly. By the time her vision had cleared, the bridge looked like a very different place.

Hundreds more White Scars legionaries stood arrayed in ranks across the outer circle of the bridge, all aiming their bolters at the command throne. The acrid residue of teleportation hung in the air, making the hairs on her neck stand up.

For a moment longer she remained entirely bewildered. Then she recognised the master-crafted Terminator plate of Jemulan Noyan-Khan, with his retinue of veterans at his back, and carrying a hissing power sword.

‘Stand down, Hasik,’ Jemulan said firmly. ‘The attempt to alter our path has failed.’

Hasik made no move to comply. To Ilya’s eyes the forces now looked evenly matched, which made her heart sink further. Combat between them would rip the bridge to pieces.

‘Not at all, brother,’ Hasik replied. ‘It is just incomplete. Do not stand in the way of progress – you do not have the whole picture.’

‘No doubt, but this is not your choice to make.’

‘It is the only choice.’

‘Then it is no choice at all,’ Jemulan replied. All around him, his troops picked out their targets. Ilya felt like shrinking back behind her sensor console – the tension hung heavily, like a thunderhead about to break.

She started to move, ducking down below the line of cogitator housings and crawling back into something like cover. As she did so, she noticed the teleportation platform, still operative but a long way away. With her heart in her mouth, she began to move towards it.

As she did so, she heard the command that she had dreaded, issued from the vox-grille of one of the commanders – she did not even recognise which one.

‘So there is nothing more to say. Open fire.’

The Khan struck first, moving faster than thought, his cloak swirling about him. Mortarion met the blow with his scythe, and a radial wave shot out from *Silence*, throwing up the ash in swirling clouds.

The Deathshroud lumbered into range, swinging their own scythes. Qin Xa’s warriors engaged

them, charging across the cracked stone and bringing their blades to bear. Neon-blue claws clashed with heavy iron, sending dull clangs resounding across the empty square. Amidst the ruins of Tizca, the two forces slammed together, moving like choreographed dancers as the eyeless faces of old statues gazed down at them.

'I see your mind, brother,' hissed the Khan, hammering home the attack. 'You would turn me, or end me.'

Mortarion grunted as he blocked the incoming dao. He moved far more slowly than the Khan, but everything he did was solid, dense, and indomitable. 'If you're stubborn enough not to see the chance here, then, yes – your time is over.'

The Khan laughed. Wielding his blade again freely felt good. The psychneuein had been a trivial challenge – going up against a fellow primarch was the kind of test he had missed for too long.

He darted in close, spinning on one boot before thrusting his sword at Mortarion's midriff. The strike was blocked, but the Death Lord stumbled.

'So *slow*,' taunted the Khan. His blade danced, flashing like the lightning above. Every strike was weighted heavily, slicing chunks from Mortarion's thick plate as if it were corroded scrap. 'You got everything wrong. Why exchange one master for another? And do not take me for a fool – only one soul may rule from the Throneworld.'

He heard the clash of blades around him, the soft rush of bolter-discharge and the heavy bang of the shells detonating. More cracks opened up underfoot, glowing red like molten steel. Muzzle-flashes lit up ruined, carven images on ancient stonework, starkly revealing the Prosperine occult devices engraved upon every facet.

Mortarion rallied, breathing hard. Though his reflexes were slow, his strength was impressive. He had already taken blows that would have felled a lesser warrior and yet seemed barely troubled.

'Your Legion called out,' he snarled, wielding *Silence* in deadening sweeps. 'You have cells operating in every brotherhood, desperate to serve. All we did was answer them.'

The Khan laughed again. He felt *alive*, unfettered, free for the first time in months to *act*. 'The lodges, eh? Secret societies? You think that'll be enough to drag us behind the Warmaster?'

Mortarion dug in, and his heavy boots sank into the ash. The Khan launched a series of blistering dao-blows, glancing off the Death Lord's thick pauldrons and sending him reeling.

'I let them meet,' the Khan said. His blade was moving brutally, smearing with speed and clanging from the scythe. 'I have always let them. I am not a tyrant, brother.'

Mortarion started to rally, meeting the Khan's fury with resolute efficiency. He took a stride back in close, planting his feet widely to close down another incoming stroke. The two weapons twisted and rebounded, sending sparks flying through the gloom. The intensity of it was vicious. Every perfect movement was vindication of the Emperor's gene-majesty, albeit exemplified in two totally different aspects. The troops battling around them, themselves titans of combat, were reduced to irrelevance, like mortal warriors straying into the quarrels of gods.

'We are all tyrants,' Mortarion rasped, picking up the pace of his scythe-blows. 'Do not fool yourself. We were bred for nothing else.'

'Not I,' said the Khan, whirling around him, moving with an almost unconscious balance. 'I care nothing for dominion. Never have. You, on the other hand... *You*. You yearn for it.'

The Khan drove Mortarion back further, pounding and pummelling him across the square's margins and towards the edge of the broken pyramid. They reeled together under the shadow of Photep's Arch, the old entrance to the immense vaults within, now roofless and gaping.

The Khan felt brief flashes of warp-fire, and guessed that it was Arvida. He heard Qin Xa's battle-cry, and gloried in it. The keshig-master was a superlative warrior, and he had no fear for him, nor any of the others.

They could fight now. They knew the enemy. They could see him, and that was enough.

'I *deserve* it,' Mortarion wheezed, gasping into his rebreather as he laboured under the assault. 'I always deserved it. You could have joined me.'

The Khan did not relent. His blade was like a shard of starlight, fierce and irresistible. 'Your time will come. You tell me the warp should be forgotten, shut away. How little you know. It will come for you now. Killing you here will be a mercy. I can already see your future darkening, dragging at your very soul.'

The two of them thundered across the base level of the pyramid, followed at every step by the echoing clash of arms around them. The edifice's open carcass rose up high above, its broken spars jutting upwards in perfect geometry towards a non-existent apex. The old internal walls, half slumped into rubble and riddled with yawning gaps, twisted away from them in a labyrinth of complexity.

'All futures are dark, now,' Mortarion replied, swiping savagely and backhanding his scythe into the edge of an exposed archway. The keystone smashed to rubble around him. 'You have no idea what Horus has become, nor the Emperor. They are both monsters, but you have chosen the wrong one. Horus is a *fighter*. He is one of us, not some immortal… aberration.'

The Khan laughed as he pursued him, this time from genuine pleasure. 'Immortal aberration?' he mused, dragging his blade down at a sharp angle and nearly severing a thicket of Mortarion's feeder cables. 'We all share his blood. What does that make us?'

More powdered stonework, destroyed by Mortarion's wild scythe-blows, bloomed in a cloud around them. Bolt-trails whined and punched through the haze before cracking into what remained of the architecture. Uncaring of anything but their own contest, the two primarchs hacked their way towards the pyramid's core, overshadowed by immense pillars and gaping roof-curves, trading blows of such heft that the earth shuddered beneath them.

'Just what do you think will happen here?' spat Mortarion, digging in again and halting his backward course. His armour had been hacked into a tattered parody of its former solidity. 'Think you can behead me, like Fulgrim did Ferrus?'

The Khan missed his aim then for the first time.

Was that true? Was Ferrus gone?

Mortarion surged back at him, kicking the hilt of *Silence* hard into the Khan's leading leg. The ivory greave-plate cracked, fizzing with energy as the ceramite fractured.

The Khan veered away from the follow-up strike, nearly losing his footing entirely. He staggered backwards as Mortarion went onto the offensive.

'Oh yes, he's dead,' Mortarion rasped. 'The numbers are against you already. They will only get worse.'

The Khan glanced upwards, up into the immense voids of the pyramid's heights. Tiny flecks of glass rained down from the smashed apex, sparkling bloodily from the fires kindling in the fissures below. Prospero's landscape growled its sullen anger, as though the world itself were outraged at a second duel of primarchs upon its soil. The carbon-dark sky, starless and empty, roiled above the jagged maw of the summit.

Mortarion's cloak spread wide, buoyed by hot updraughts from the cobweb of glowing crevasses. For a moment, he looked like some vision of the underworld, a phantom of old Chogoris – consumed by yaksha, eternal and devilish.

The Khan fell back further, holding his dao two-handed. Mortarion was strong, as strong as the roots of the Ulaav mountains, but he was slow. The two of them were perfectly matched, like two sides of a medal.

If we fought on the same side, he and I, countering our weaknesses, could anything stand before us? he thought. *Even Horus? Even the Emperor?*

He gazed into Mortarion's pallid face and saw the resentment burning there, just as it did in him.

He is lost. We have all been betrayed.

The Death Lord strode closer, sweeping *Silence* low and hard, his expression curdling into hatred, his sclerotic breath low and rapid.

'Come then, brother,' said the Khan, bracing for the impact once more, holding position amidst the glass tears of Magnus's lost city. 'Let us decide this, you and I. For eternity.'

Yesugei stood upon the *Sickle Moon*'s command bridge watching Prospero grow rapidly in the forward view. Lushan, armoured for the coming combat, bellowed orders to the crew, no doubt still convinced that the ship was going to break up around him at any minute.

The last stage had been the most punishing of all, tearing at the Geller field and ravaging the warp drives. Yesugei had heard the screams of yaksha even in his waking hours. When he went to assist the Navigators, the beasts had been clearly visible in the seething hell beyond the real-view blisters, ramming up against the ship's warp-wake and scrabbling at the hull as it tore through their domain.

They had almost lost the *Hesiod*, but a combination of Henricos's tech-mastery and the combined efforts of Yesugei and the Navigators had somehow got them through. They had broken into real space at the closest vector possible, after which the engines had burned like miniature suns to bring them into orbit around the dying world. Even from far out, Yesugei felt the psychic terror still resonant on the planet, like a blackened scab over an old and deep wound.

'What of the fleet?' he asked again, unable to make sense of the data that his sensors were giving him.

'Out of position,' replied Lushan, disbelievingly. 'Scattered. No defensive lines, nothing.'

Yesugei felt deep unease. Some of the White Scars warships were visibly drifting, others moving to intercept one another. None of them were responding to the Death Guard vessels coming in to engage them.

'Bring lances online,' he ordered. 'Take us at the Death Guard formation and open fire. Hit them with everything we have.'

Lushan nodded, and barked orders down the chain of command. Almost instantly, the *Sickle Moon*'s course switched, taking the ship hard away two points to starboard and thundering towards the closest XIV Legion battleship. The bridge filled with the growl and judder of weapon systems powering up, and void shields rippled across the forward viewports.

They had moved efficiently, but they were still slower than the *Hesiod* – Henricos's thirst for vengeance drove him harder than all of them. His machine-spare voice hissed over the bridge-comm.

'*We don't have the guns to take them all on,*' he observed.

'Do not need to,' replied Yesugei in Gothic, watching as the enemy hurtled into range. The Death Guard looked complacent, concentrated on drawing close to the embattled White Scars fleet. 'Something very wrong. Need only to clarify thoughts of my brothers.'

'*What are they doing? It's like they're fighting–*'

'They will come around.'

'*And the Khan? Do you sense him?*'

Yesugei glanced at the dark orb on the screen, now filling half the scopes. He sensed nothing but the residue of some enormous warp-agony, as if the entire population had been wrenched out of their bodies and shriven. The planet was still wrapped in aetheric energies.

'No,' he said grimly. 'Not yet.'

Henricos sent a low grunt over the comm-link, as if that confirmed something he had long suspected. '*Changes nothing,*' he said. '*We can still hurt those bastards*.'

Yesugei nodded, gauging the rapidly closing space between their vessels and the enemy. Both the

Hesiod and the *Sickle Moon* were far smaller than the four main enemy ships, and they had escorts already racing to intercept.

'That we can, my brother,' he said quietly.

TWENTY-TWO

Under the apex
Gauntlet run
Swordstorm

Mortarion's raw strength was renewed. Facing it full-on, the Khan doubted that any of his brothers, save perhaps Ferrus, could have matched it. The Death Lord absorbed every strike that connected, sucking the power out of the blows like a leech, taking the hits and coming back for more.

The tenacity of the Death Guard was legendary, as was their ability to absorb punishment and just keep coming. Now, witnessing them in combat for the first time, he appreciated just how true it was. The silent Deathshroud were as implacable as their master, still fighting with the keshig amidst the wreckage. Warriors of both sides had already fallen, their bodies caked in the drifting dust, but the fighting continued around them, bitter and unyielding.

The pyramid's vast interior rose up around the combatants, terrace upon terrace, blotting out what little light remained under its blackened shell. The two primarchs had torn through what must once have been the antechambers and audience halls, kicking aside fire-crisped books, old instruments and carbonised artefacts from a thousand worlds. Now the heart of it loomed before them – a circular floor of obsidian, ivory-traced with mystic swirls of silver and clogged with the atrophied cadavers of the long-fallen. Banded columns as wide as Rhino transports towered all around, rearing up into the gloom like sentinels. At the very centre, inlaid into the dust-streaked floor in gold, was the Eye of Magnus, still glistening faintly even beneath the filth that caked it. Directly above them, hundreds of metres up, was the apex itself, open to the fury of the skies.

As they broke into the circle, the Khan felt himself tiring at last. Never in uncounted years of combat had he felt more than trivial stirrings of fatigue. He had fought the greatest champions of xenos races, had brought down creatures that stood as tall as Warhound Titans, had carved his way through fields of greenskins as violent and unending as the tides of the sea, and still he had never felt the bone-deep drag that Mortarion inspired.

Only the primarchs could destroy the primarchs.

Mortarion began to laugh in his coarse way.

'Never had it this hard, eh?' he grunted, still wielding *Silence* heavily. He was suffering too – blood flecked his cheeks and forehead, and his rebreather rattled as he hauled in thick breaths.

The Khan launched another attack, flourishing the dao before searching for a way through Mortarion's stony defence. He was still faster, still more accomplished with the blade, but it was like duelling with entropy itself.

'You neither,' the Khan observed, gesturing to the lines of reddened sweat trickling down Mortarion's ash-grey temples.

'True enough.'

Mortarion's voice gave away his regret. Even amidst the slow-burn resentments, the long bitterness, the Death Lord was still sane enough to see the irony of the situation. The primarchs had been bred to fight as part of one army, each brother making up for the deficiencies of the other. For all the jealousies and rivalries, in terms of raw conquest that army had been perfect. The Emperor's vision – the Great Crusade for Unity, sweeping across the stars, governed by twenty immortal avatars of his own unmatched psyche – had been impeccable.

Now, though, here they were: brawling amidst the embers of Russ's vandalism. The fall was already severe, and they both knew that it would plummet deeper before the end.

'You could recant,' the Khan said, falling away from a whistling sweep of the scythe just as it angled at his helm. 'Horus does not own you.'

Mortarion snorted. 'No, and he never will.'

'You have seen our father's glory unleashed – none of us could stand against him.'

Mortarion surged back on the offensive. Around them, the columns flickered and leapt with the reflection of fiery disruptor energies. 'He is hobbled by his own mistakes. The Throneroom is a den of nightmares, one that he cannot leave. The field is open – it is ours to claim.'

The Khan beat away a scythe-strike and went for Mortarion's gorget. At the last minute he jutted the blade down, slipped below the defence and cut a long gash in the primarch's breastplate. This time the blade cut deep, paring already fractured armour and delving into the ribcage below.

Mortarion grimaced and jerked clear, cracking the Khan's sword away with his scythe-shaft and staggering backwards.

'There is nothing to seize,' growled the Khan, going after him. 'Nothing but burned earth. Look around you – you will make this the whole galaxy.'

Mortarion snarled defiantly and barrelled back at him, using the scythe like a halberd and smashing the hilt into the Khan's midriff. The Khan lurched away, stumbling across the uneven floor, and Mortarion lumbered after him. More blows came in – hard, heavy, earth-shaking blows. The Khan was driven further, only barely able to weather the explosion of fury directed at him.

When they slammed together again the impact was bone-jarring. They tore into one another, each strike powered by raw defiance. Fragments of armour flew like shrapnel. Gas exploded from Mortarion's store of vials as the glass was shattered, nearly blinding them both. Blood flew in straggling splatters, trailing across both combatants and staining their armour. As they hacked and countered, neither giving up so much as a centimetre of ground, it mingled upon the blades' edges, as rich and dark as wine.

As the Khan fought on, the taste of copper in his mouth and the burn of acid in his muscles, he felt the lore of the plains nag at him. He needed *space* – room to use his speed. He had to break free, to turn the fight to his strengths, to rip clear of Mortarion's cloying grasp.

Summoning up one last burst of energy, the Khan bludgeoned aside the scythe and pulled away, beckoning his adversary to come after him. The Death Lord held *Silence* high, casting a sickle-shadow over the eye-device upon the floor. His ripped cloak billowed out in an almost parodic vision of old legends – the reaper-myth of a thousand human worlds, summoned into life on a world of extinguished souls.

The Khan held position, panting hard, trying to drag up energy for the final clash. His hearts thudded, his lungs burned. He held the dao poised, waiting for his enemy to move.

Come to me. You can see my weakness.

One thrust. One perfect thrust, angled precisely – he had the strength for that. It would have to be flawless; if it were not, no defence remained. Nothing else would suffice for this enemy. No lesser move would accomplish the kill.

But Mortarion did not move. He stood, rigid, as though suddenly listening for something. His scythe fell into guard. A thin coughing broke from his mask, which the Khan soon realised was an exhausted kind of chortle.

'So the choice has been made.'

The Khan held his ground, unsure what he meant. Mortarion gestured to the Deathshroud, and they began to pull back towards his position.

'Our ships are at *war*, brother,' wheezed Mortarion acidly, limping into retreat. 'This was not what

we were promised, but I will not lose a fleet for this fight.' The words blurred from all the blood bubbling in his mouth, spilling out from the edges of his mask. 'Mark it, though – this thing is eternal between us, now. You and I, our fates bonded in this place. Remember that. It was *here* that it started.'

The Khan felt the dust stir around his feet. Coils of marsh-green energy rippled down from the pyramid's open apex.

'And when we next do this,' rasped Mortarion, 'the lines will already be drawn.'

He saluted mockingly, and spears of hard-edged light suddenly lanced down from above, bursting through the cloud cover and crashing through the heart of the pyramid-carcass.

The Khan sprang forward, seeing too late what was happening. The dao moved quickly – blisteringly fast, as fast as he had ever moved it. If it had connected then it would have stabbed straight through Mortarion's neck, darting over his guard and severing the coils that kept him breathing.

But in an instant, the Death Lord and his retinue were snatched away, sucked into the vortex of the warp. The world's wind howled in their empty wake, the ash stirred, the lightning forked.

The Khan, carried by his momentum, staggered through the empty space where his enemy had been. He whirled around, wrong-footed, still poised to strike.

Qin Xa faced him, unblooded but for his blades. The Thousand Sons legionary was still there, as were five of the keshig.

'Get me back to him!' the Khan roared, still pumping with aggression. The hunt had not been concluded – the kill had been ripped away.

Qin Xa lowered his weapons. For a moment he said nothing, but faint clicks from his helm gave away the attempts he was making to contact the ships in orbit.

Then he shook his head. Whatever means the Death Guard were using to penetrate Prospero's aether-barrier, it could not be replicated.

The Khan turned to Arvida. 'This is your world,' he hissed. 'Get me off it.'

The sorcerer looked unsteady on his feet.

'Your ships are still in orbit?' Arvida glanced at Qin Xa. 'The barrier is the problem?'

'I believe so.'

'It will be difficult,' Arvida murmured, looking back at the Khan. 'I can only manage a short while. Let us hope someone is watching carefully.'

The Khan nodded. 'Do it.'

Arvida backed away, the others giving him plenty of space. He collected himself, clasping his hands together. Witch-light coalesced around him, drawing to his armour like spinning stars. Flickers of silver kindled upon his gauntlets, picking up strength; in a few moments, both his hands were blazing with light so intense that it was hard to look at.

Then he extended both hands heavenwards, and released a column of coruscating luminescence, electric-white and searing hot. It shot out vertically, leaping up the central shaft of the pyramid and bursting into the skies above.

He staggered, only just keeping his feet, but the line of aether-force kept thundering out of him. The sky ignited into a chain reaction of silver. Answering peals snapped out from above, as hard as thunderclaps. A lattice of iridescence cobwebbed across the underside of the cloud cover. For the first time, the unbroken wall of occlusion broke, revealing a rainbow-spectrum of lurid shades beyond it that burned and danced like aurorae.

Arvida himself began to shimmer, his crimson armour blazing. The incandescence intensified until it became blinding. For a moment, the Khan thought that he might be staring straight into the Astronomican itself, and had to turn away.

He looked upwards, over to where Arvida's released energy still shot into the turbulent skies.

'Now we hope,' he muttered, darkly.

Shiban's elation at Jemulan's entrance had been short-lived. The forces were now even, each carrying devastating amounts of firepower. Every stage of the escalation had brought the ruin of the Legion closer – weapons that had been made to turn upon enemies were now opening up at one another.

He stayed crouched, his guan dao activated and ready, gauging where to strike. Hasik and his forces still had control of the command throne area at the far end of the bridge hall, plus the high observation deck and the wall terraces. Jemulan's troops had teleported in two groups along the flanks, and the bulk of them were at the near end, clustered amidst the sensorium stations. There was plenty of cover for both sides, though the presence of hundreds of mortal crew members, locked down at their consoles and stricken with uncertainty, made the prospect of a clean confrontation less likely than that of a collateral bloodbath.

The prospect filled him with a sensation close to nausea.

How have we come to this? How has this madness taken hold?

Putting aside such thoughts, Shiban leapt from cover. 'To me, brothers!' he roared, beckoning them back into the fray.

His brotherhood surged into the open again, keeping low and sprinting towards the enemy. The fighting was just as tight and claustrophobic and horrifying as it had been before. Space Marine crunched into Space Marine, full-blooded and committed. Jemulan's Terminator retinue crashed through balustrade railings to get at their counterparts, already laying down a blistering curtain of combi-bolter shells. Ornate pillars and buttresses took damage, quickly becoming pocked and cratered.

The mortal crew, unable to do anything in the face of such unleashed fury, cowered behind what defences they could find.

All but one. A grey-haired woman, her Army general's uniform rumpled and torn, ran straight towards Shiban as he charged the servitor pits, waving her arms frantically.

Shiban's first reaction was to shove her aside and get to the enemy. Jochi and the others streaked ahead of him, leaping over stairways and around obstacles to charge at Torghun's warriors.

Something in her eyes stopped him.

She was desperate – not to survive, but to get his attention.

Her face was familiar. He had seen her before, somewhere.

'*Stop!*' she shouted, bawling her lungs out over the roar of battle. '*The Khagan! I have a locus!*'

Shiban scraped to a halt. She looked incredibly frail, out in the open with no blast-armour – not even a lasgun – and he towered over her.

'The teleport platform,' she panted. 'Get me to it.'

The chamber was two hundred metres away across an open stretch of marble flooring, criss-crossed with bolter-trails. Already the columns were taking hits, caught in the concentration of fire between the rival factions.

She would never make it. Even he might struggle.

'Who are you?' he demanded, moving around to shelter her with his armoured form.

'Damn you!' she screamed, looking like she might punch him. 'Who do you think opened the docking bay doors? I've got a lock! You understand? Get me there or watch your Legion destroy itself!'

Shiban glanced again at the teleportation platform, looked back at her pleading expression, and made up his mind.

'Don't struggle,' he said, scooping her up under his left arm. She weighed hardly anything. 'Just hang on.'

Then he took off, head low, sprinting as fast as he could.

The first shell hit him only a few metres out, colliding with his right pauldron and nearly knocking

him onto his chest. He staggered away from the impact and kept going. He made it halfway across the chamber before being struck on the leg – a direct hit. The ceramite of his knee-guard shattered, driving shrapnel through the armoured layers beneath.

He fell, crashing to his knees, arching his body to protect the mortal who still clung on. If she screamed, he did not hear her; the thunder of battle roared all around him, growing in volume as the two sides locked in earnest.

He got to his feet again, ignoring the blaze of agony in his leg. He dragged himself towards the chamber, still keeping the woman sheltered. More hits came in – a bolt-round to the back that exploded against his armour's power pack, and another hit to the same leg that made his vision go black with pain. A plasma bolt smashed into his damaged pauldron, glancing from the curve but showering the wound with molten metal.

He kept going, gritting his teeth against the agony. As the platform's columns rose above him, he pushed the mortal clear before his falling body could crush her.

She crawled free, darting into the relative safety of the chamber's inner mechanisms. Shiban looked up, bleeding heavily, and saw her reach a control point. As more bolts exploded against the circlet of columns, she frantically punched in a series of codes, and the apparatus began to hum with building power.

A second later, and the space between them exploded with light. A hard bang shot out, radiating across the entire bridge like a series of krak grenades going off. Electric spears forked out, lashing and snapping at the columns before shuddering out again.

Shiban watched the woman recoil from the roiling sunburst, shading her eyes with her hands. For a moment he could not see anything within the seething mass of energy.

Then figures clarified within it – White Scars in Terminator plate, and a Space Marine in red armour on his knees from exhaustion.

Before them stood a greater silhouette, massive in ornate armour, his cloak shredded to ribbons, his face an armoured mask of burns and heavy cuts.

He strode out of the failing storm of light and cast a baleful gaze across the bridge. The hall was still in torment, with brothers at each other's throats, lost in a maddened world of battle-cries and muzzle-flares.

Shiban coughed up blood, unable to move. The Khan walked clear of the teleportation platform, twisting his helm off as he came. He gazed out across the bridge, his severe face twisted in horror. For a moment he did nothing but watch the carnage, shock etched on his features.

Shiban's mind raced back to Chondax, to the last time he had been so close to the primarch. Back then he might have been content to die to achieve such an honour, for that had been in glorious battle against the xenos. This, though, was different, for so much still remained in the balance and there was precious little glory in what any of them had done. He tried to rise.

But the pain rushed back in, blinding him, filling his head with the throbbing swell of agony. He tried to drag himself closer, to speak, but could not. He felt his organs giving out, followed by a cold wave of numbness across his chest.

His helm clanged to the deck, and all went dark.

The Khan strode down from the platform, his keshig following him closely. Ahead of him, the command hall remained swamped in combat. Many of those close enough to the teleportation flare to hear it over the clamour of the fighting broke off in sudden confusion, but others remained committed, locked in the storm of bolt-shells that crisscrossed the entire space.

For a terrible moment, the Khan witnessed the warriors of his Legion at each other's throats. Mortarion's words rang in his head, as mocking as that final salute.

Half your Legion are already declared for Horus.

He scanned over to the command throne. The fighting was heaviest there. With a lurch of recognition, he saw Hasik occupying the dais, fighting hard to repel a surge from Jemulan's warriors.

'Qin Xa, with me,' he snarled, striding out. The Khan's battered body carried him into the heart of the storm. His dao felt heavy in his grasp, still slick with Mortarion's blood. The keshig came with him, forming a protective cordon around their primarch.

As he swept through the heart of it, some of the fighting broke down. Warriors looked up from their duels, seeing the ravaged armour of their primarch again as he strode up to the throne, as if realising only then the depths to which they had sunk in his absence. The echoing cacophony of bolter-fire abated.

Hasik was waiting for him. The bridge fell silent. Warriors remained in position, their weapons still poised. Every eye was fixed upon the command dais.

'Noyan-khan,' said the Khan coldly, climbing the steps and looking down at Hasik. 'What madness is unleashed here?'

Hasik kept his blade in hand. His expression was inscrutable behind the lenses of his Terminator helm.

'It was for all of us,' Hasik said, but even behind the rasp of the vox-grille his voice betrayed his uncertainty. 'For the Legion.'

'You knew I would come back,' said the Khan. 'Or did you also plan to keep me away until the fleet was secure in your hands? Was that your hope?'

Hasik's weapon-hand twitched. 'I wished to see you and the Warmaster united once more. That was my only hope. The whispers of the faithless could not be allowed to prevail.'

'Faithless?' The Khan swept his gaze back across the bridge. 'You cause *this*, and call others faithless?'

Hasik bristled. 'It can still be achieved!' he cried. 'We made mistakes, but nonetheless we see the truth. He has called, we must follow. That has always been the way.'

'You have been lied to.'

'But, lord, you gave no command.'

'You were told to *wait*.'

'Do not end this now,' urged Hasik, taking a step closer. 'Give me time, let me explain.'

'There *is* no more time.'

'Lord, I beg–'

'*Enough!*' roared the Khan, raising his blade.

Perhaps unconsciously, perhaps without meaning to, or perhaps through some misguided belief that his cause lent him the power to do so, Hasik lifted his own in response.

The Khan pounced, sweeping his dao hard and locking edges with Hasik's tulwar. With a twist, he wrenched the sword from the noyan-khan's gauntlet, then switched back and plunged the dao's point deep into Hasik's midriff. The strike was aimed with perfect precision, lancing through the Terminator plate with a hard crack of disruptor discharge.

Hasik went rigid, impaled just below his hearts, unable to respond as searing energies rippled across his body and locked him in paralysis.

Slowly, grindingly, the Khan hefted Hasik off the ground one-handed, pulling him upwards until their faces were level. His blade kept Hasik in position, bearing his full weight and preventing him from responding.

With every ounce of his post-human strength, the Khan reached for Hasik's helm with his free hand and wrenched it from his head, casting it to the ground in contempt. For a moment they stared into

one another's eyes – one face white with shock, the other rigid with anger.

'You say you see the truth,' snarled the Khan. 'You know *nothing* of the truth. If you had done as I had commanded, I would be telling you of it now. Instead I will only tell you this – the Legion is the ordu of Jaghatai, and none bear their blades in it save by my word. Thus it has been since we first fought together on the Altak, and no power of the universe, be it Horus or the Emperor or the gods themselves, will *ever* change that.'

Hasik's eyes stared wildly, and blood foamed up at the corner of his mouth. His empty gauntlets flexed impotently.

'You were given freedom that no other lord would countenance,' said the Khan, his voice heavy with bitterness. 'Thus do you repay me, and thus do I *strike you down*.'

The Khan flung Hasik's body aside. It flew free of the blade and crashed into the throne, cracking it lengthways, before rolling down the steps of the dais. Qin Xa strode over to him, his own weapons drawn, but Hasik did not get up.

The Khan turned away. Rage still pulsed through his veins, laced with the heavy grief of betrayal. For an instant his mind was filled with visions of lashing out further, of bringing punishment down on the entirety of his errant gene-progeny like some vengeful god of the forgotten past.

In the end, though, his eyes were drawn up to the observation arch, out through the enormous real-view portals towards Prospero's orbital space. Far out into the void, silent bursts of light flashed out. Mortarion had spoken the truth about that, at least – ships had engaged, lances were being fired, shields were buckling.

There was no time left. He drew in a long breath.

'A reckoning will come!' the Khan cried, addressing the hundreds who waited for guidance. 'But for now, battle calls. Vox the rest of the fleet. We engage the Death Guard, *guang-cha* formation, full burn.'

He swept his dark gaze back across his warriors, and the weight of his disappointment in them was crushing.

'The enemy is known. We hunt again.'

The *Sickle Moon* powered in close, shields buckling, lances overheating, engines thundering. The Death Guard battleship yawed away above it, burning from the strafing run and hurling back heavy las-fire in return.

Somewhere close by, the *Hesiod* was careening into the heart of the enemy formation, weapons blazing and void shields on fire. They had both shot into the XIV Legion flotilla at full tilt, knowing that only speed could keep them alive for long. The enemy, advancing slowly to engage a divided and leaderless fleet, had initially been unprepared for the savagery of it. However, their shock had not taken long to wear off.

'Hard about!' thundered Lushan, working hard to keep the worst of the incoming fire from tearing them into void debris. 'Watch that gunship wing – re-target the lateral arrays.'

Yesugei stood silently as the deck tilted. Voidwar was an uncomfortable experience for him – there was nothing he could do to control the process. Lushan was a formidable commander, though, and that put his mind at some ease. He had already kept the ship together during a ferocious counter-barrage and was now driving it hard towards the Death Guard vessel's dorsal hull plating.

'Power to the lances,' Lushan ordered, gripping the arms of his command throne tightly.

Even as the words left his mouth, a vicious spike of las-fire impacted across the *Sickle Moon*'s starboard flank, sending the stressed void shields wild with splash-pattern distortion. The whole ship kicked, as though the engines had briefly coughed out, before it slewed down towards the engagement sphere's nadir.

The bridge lumens briefly flickered out, followed by an echoing grind from many decks down.

Lushan looked up at Yesugei and smiled wryly. ‘This might be our last pass, zadyin arga.’

Yesugei nodded. ‘Then make it count, brother.’

The *Sickle Moon* righted, and the thrusters powered it back into position. Ahead of them, just a few hundred kilometres distant, reared the immense outline of the Death Guard battleship *Lord of Hyrus*. It was more than five times the size of the White Scars ship and built for protracted assault. Its void shields had been strafed badly on the first attack run, but the damage had not been enough to knock them out.

Lushan drove the *Sickle Moon* right at it, and Yesugei felt the deck shudder as the engines roared again.

‘Lances,’ Lushan ordered. ‘Now.’

The armoury answered, and ice-white beams of energy shot out at the *Lord of Hyrus*. They hit hard amidships, cracking the void shields around them and carving into the hull.

The White Scars crew cheered, watching the damage spread rapidly. Explosions blossomed out across the battleship, ripping up hull plating and exposing the deck-lattice beneath.

‘Hard about!’ ordered Lushan. ‘They will respond with–’

The *Sickle Moon* was hit by a blinding volley of counter-measures almost instantly. Torpedoes scythed through the clouds of venting plasma, catching the ship as it angled tightly away from the Death Guard vessel. Las-fire followed – well-aimed and dense.

Yesugei glanced at the scopes. The rearmost of the bigger warships was coming around for the kill, its weapons powering. The *Hesiod* was in bigger trouble – it had recklessly charged straight into the maw of the monstrous flagship, the *Endurance*. Henricos had caused havoc but had taken a horrific amount of return fire. He would be lucky to last more than a few more minutes.

‘Can we cover the *Hesiod*?’ asked Yesugei calmly.

Lushan laughed. ‘We will do well to survive our own attack run.’

The *Sickle Moon* was still travelling fast, burning at three-quarters full thrust. Heavier las-fire followed it like crows mobbing a raptor. Another torpedo hit somewhere to aft, sending fresh judders radiating through the structure. They hurtled away from the *Lord of Hyrus*, sweeping clear of its hard-edged turrets before powering into the void beyond.

Just as Yesugei thought that Lushan had somehow angled them clear of danger, another battleship loomed down over them from hard to port-zenith, its weapons already throbbing hot, its void shields evidently intact. Yesugei saw the stylised skull on the prow and knew they could never hope to hurt it, not quickly enough.

‘Pull away!’ roared Lushan.

Yesugei clutched his staff a little tighter. No doubt the enemy gunners had already targeted them. ‘No,’ he said calmly. ‘Maintain position.’

‘That will carry us into their teeth,’ warned Lushan.

Yesugei nodded. ‘We were never going to come out of this, brother.’

Lushan drew in a breath, then bowed. ‘Belay move. Master gunner, give me everything we have left.’ He smiled at Yesugei grimly. ‘We can at least dent their pride.’

The *Sickle Moon* aborted its hard turn and fed more power to the engines. The vast shadow of the Death Guard vessel filled the forward scopes, bristling with banks of swollen weaponry. Two massive lances jutted from under the bladed prow, each one decorated with screaming death’s heads. Their muzzles glowed as the immense power lines lit up.

The *Sickle Moon* fired first. A spread of las-beams and a final torpedo volley screamed out into the void. The aim was good – the enemy took a flurry of hits, exploding out across the prow in an inferno of fiery light. When the flames guttered out, they revealed a blackened and distorted mess of

metal. Sparks spiralled out into the void from the twisted remains of bulkheads and sensor shrouds.

'Did we eliminate the lances?' asked Yesugei, daring to hope.

Lushan shook his head, still smiling. 'Too much to wish for, I fear.'

The *Sickle Moon* was still on an intercept course, and too committed to pull out of range in time. Lushan ordered it into a steep dive, but even Yesugei could see that it would take effect too late. The lances on the Death Guard vessel surged with pre-firing light. The weapons seemed oddly beautiful in the endless night, like Qo hanging lanterns glowing under a sunset.

Yesugei stood tall, determined to face it with his eyes open.

Let it be that we did some good, he thought as the lances fired. *Let it be that the example was enough.*

The Death Guard ship loosed its payload and the anterior viewscreens went dark. Static crackled across the pict-feeds. Yesugei tensed for the roar and rush of the vacuum, for the bridge to spin apart around him.

The destruction never arrived. With a sudden lurch of recognition, he realised what had made the scopes go black.

A ship. An immense, proud, vast and powerful ship had interposed itself between them, casting a shadow across the *Sickle Moon*'s scopes and blotting out the light of Prospero's sun.

Swordstorm.

He'd forgotten just how majestic the flagship was. It had been a manoeuvre of phenomenal shipmastery to bring such a monster between the Death Guard and its prey. Now it coursed smoothly above them, row upon row of cannons nestled along dagger-length flanks. Its thrusters swelled red into the void, burning like a cluster of angry stars.

'The Khagan!' cried Lushan, rising up from the throne.

Just as he spoke, the *Swordstorm* opened up with a full broadside. The void disappeared in a raging storm of light, flaring like dawn over the Altak. The XIV Legion vessel was caught up in it, subsumed and deluged in a curtain of fire. Explosions blazed along its hull, feeding on one another, racing out from the impact-centres and blistering the adamantium plating.

Yesugei stared up at the locator-scopes. More ships were coming in, pulling out of their lethargy and burning towards the Death Guard flotilla. He could see the signature of the *Lance of Heaven* at the forefront. Even the laggards, the ones that had seemed lifeless and drifting, were coming about. More beams of energy lanced through the void, lighting up the well of space with new fire.

He bowed his head, allowing himself, for just an instant, to feel relief.

'*Zadyin arga*.'

The voice that came over the comm somehow did not degrade like the others. It had been six years since last he heard it. It retained its old richness, though spiked with something else – disillusionment, perhaps.

Yesugei turned to the hololith forming over the column at his shoulder. The Khan's face materialised into a flickering shroud.

'Was that a feint, then?' Yesugei asked, trying not to let his delight at the image break out too evidently.

'*The fleet? No, sadly not. We suffered division in your absence. What kept you?*'

Yesugei smiled. 'The universe,' he said.

Lushan pulled the *Sickle Moon* clear of the worst of the fighting. The crew struggled to keep the shields in any kind of shape, and the weapons array was in ruins, but it would survive. More White Scars vessels surged past them, racing into combat and covering their withdrawal.

'*That Sons of Horus vessel,*' said the Khan. '*An ally? It will be destroyed if it keeps fighting.*'

'Do your best to protect it, please,' said Yesugei. 'It contains an Iron Hand who deserves to live,

much as that will irritate him, and Salamanders, all of whom will fight again.'

As they spoke, the Death Guard formation began to fall back. Outnumbered and outpaced, the escorts started to fall into a defensive cordon, preparing the way for the larger vessels to break for their jump-points. The White Scars went after them, harrying, strafing, hurling all their pent-up fury in a maelstrom of lance-energy.

The Khan's image distorted briefly as the *Swordstorm* issued another truly ferocious broadside. '*You have been missed, weather-maker*,' he said, then flickered out.

Yesugei bowed again, watching the sphere of combat fall away as the *Sickle Moon* pulled further back. The *Swordstorm* ploughed onwards, wreathed in the fire of its own weapons, hurled like a spear into the heart of the fighting.

And then, at last, the pride of the Legion came after it, streaking across the void like raptors over an open sky.

TWENTY-THREE

Reckoning
Recovery
The hunt

The Second Battle of Prospero did not match the horror of the first, for the Death Guard had come to oversee the incorporation of an ally, not embark upon a protracted void conflict. The two fleets grappled together as they pulled away from Prospero, locked in a web of broadsides and attack runs. Under Mortarion's leadership, the smaller XIV Legion forces rallied enough to withdraw from the system intact, but they could match neither the speed nor the firepower of the renewed White Scars. The battle moved steadily out of the system until Mortarion finally gave the order to disengage and make for the jump-points. Leaving a trail of fire and plasma in their wake, the Death Guard entered the warp, abandoning local space to the control of the Khan.

With the enemy driven from Prospero, the V Legion halted pursuit. The fleet mustered once more, holding position in loose formation, just as it had done at Chondax. Some ships still ran with dissension, and the process of restoring order was neither quick nor without violence. The Khan visited every battleship in person, stamping out the last traces of rebellion where he found them. Blood had been shed on many vessels, and some had been commandeered entirely by lodge members still hoping to sway the Legion to the cause. Some took their own lives rather than endure the shame of surrender, though most recognised the authority of the Khagan and offered up their blades in contrition.

A few smaller vessels never made it to the muster, either destroyed by the Death Guard during the engagement or disappearing quietly, presumed unwilling to accept the rejection of their planned accord with the Warmaster. The seeds planted by the lodges were set deep, and not all of their growths were capable of being uprooted.

The wounded Hasik Noyan-Khan remained on the *Swordstorm* throughout the engagement. Only when Mortarion had been banished did Qin Xa come for him, removing his weapons and armour and escorting him to the confinement chambers. Hasik did not resist. His face gave away the soul of a man destroyed. Others went with him into confinement, among them Goghal, Hibou and Torghun Khan. There they awaited judgement, guarded by the Khagan's own retinue. No precedent existed in the V Legion for their actions, though under the old law of the Altak, the crime of treachery had only one punishment.

The *Hesiod* remained with the fleet. Henricos had nearly driven it to destruction, but its final collapse had been prevented by the *Tchin-Zar*, which had shielded it just as the final torpedo volleys came in. The Khan honoured the Iron Hands legionary, as well as the others of the shattered Legions, and they were offered the chance to fight alongside the White Scars as part of whatever brotherhood they chose. Henricos considered the offer but made no commitment. When the *Hesiod* was restored, he said, he would make up his mind. Most observers predicted that he would choose to take the fight to the enemy himself. He claimed to have seen evidence of Sons of Horus splinter-fleet movements, and itched to run them down.

Arvida too remained with the Legion, and was given quarters on board the *Swordstorm*. His health had been ravaged by the long sojourn on a dying world, and it took days for him to recover enough to speak of what he had seen.

Yesugei and he spent many hours together after that, though what they discussed was not revealed to any but the Khan. It was known that Yesugei asked after the fate of Ahzek Ahriman, whom he had hoped to see again, but Arvida could give him no guidance. The Stormseer was forced to conclude that Ahriman had either been killed by the Wolves or had escaped along with his master. In either case it seemed most likely that they would never meet again, something that grieved Yesugei more than all of what had taken place since Ullanor. Of the many links that had once existed between the White Scars and the Thousand Sons, only Arvida remained.

As for the Khan himself, once the violence of restoration had ebbed, he retreated to his chambers on the flagship and took counsel on the Legion's next move. Only Qin Xa and Yesugei stayed with him during that time, though it was known that a *kurultai* – a summit of the khans – would be convened to purge any remaining bad blood. It became quickly evident that the lodge faction had not truly understood what they had been working towards, for the Horus they venerated no longer existed. The knowledge gleaned from Magnus needed to be propagated swiftly, ending the long period of uncertainty that had blighted the Legion.

Such was the way of the old plains: grievances would be heard, penance would be meted, bonds restored.

No chrono-mark was set for the gathering, but all the khans knew it would be soon. Now that the shape of the treachery was known it would not be long before the brotherhoods were ordered to war, unified once more and thirsting for vengeance.

Until then, there was nothing to do but prepare, restore, and hope that the wounds would heal.

Shiban woke in the apothecarion. His body blazed with pain. Gingerly, he lifted his head. Tubes ran from his torso, gurgling with fluids. Blood-cycling machinery hummed in clusters around him. He saw vital-sign readouts scrolling across a dark screen, and noted how weak they were.

He felt nauseous. His head was hammering, throbbing as if filled with too much blood.

'You're awake, then,' came a voice at his side.

Shiban turned his head to see the woman he had saved. She looked much as she had done on the bridge – a slight frame, clad in an old Army uniform. Her grey hair was tied back, her lined face scrubbed clean of the grime that had streaked it before.

He tried to bow, and failed. Spikes of pain ran up his neck.

'I do not... I do not know your name,' he croaked.

The woman bowed. 'Ilya Ravallion. Counsellor to the Great Khan. Organiser. Observer. Hanger-on.'

Shiban swallowed dryly. He could feel nutrients entering his body from the tubes. It was an uncomfortable sensation.

'In another Legion,' said Ilya, 'if things had gone worse, they tell me you might have been placed in a Dreadnought. But of course this Legion does not hold with them, so you are lucky to be so tough.'

Shiban grimaced. He did not feel lucky.

Ilya moved around the bed, so that he could face her without having to angle his head awkwardly. 'Why did you help me?' she asked.

'I saw you before. On Chondax.'

'You have a memory for faces.'

'You stood out.'

'As a woman?'

'As a Terran.'

Ilya nodded. 'We are getting rarer. The process will quicken now, I suppose.'

Shiban drew in a sharp breath. The pain was getting worse. If he could have lifted his head, he might have been able to see what had been done to the rest of his body. 'What happened?' he asked. 'Afterwards?'

'The Legion is restored,' said Ilya. 'You fought as well as I have ever seen. Things will be simpler from now on – allegiances have been cemented.'

Shiban's brow creased. It was hard to remember anything with precision. 'It was like… a madness.'

'They tell me Prospero made it worse. The warp runs through the whole place, and we were reckless to remain there for so long. Then again, that is the mark of this Legion, is it not? I do not think you will change.'

'What of Torghun?'

Ilya looked blank.

'The Brotherhood of the Moon. We fought.'

'In confinement, then. Judgement will come when the Khan makes his determination.'

Shiban felt a mix of emotions. Torghun was too fine a warrior to wish death upon, though the crime had been severe and many of his own battle-brothers had fallen. Shiban dreaded recovering sufficiently to read the death-tally. He wondered if the list would carry Jochi's name. Or Sangjai's, or Chel's.

'You let us onto the *Swordstorm*,' he said. 'So I could ask you the same question – why did you help me?'

Ilya shook her head, as if she didn't quite know herself. 'All those around me were behaving like madmen. They wouldn't tell me anything, and the Khan was not there. I don't like deception. Keeping secrets is what got us into this mess.' She looked directly at him then, almost defiantly. 'It was a feeling. Nothing more.'

Shiban did his best to nod. It was as good an explanation as he had for helping her. 'What next, then?' he asked.

'We don't know. Not yet.' Then she smiled. She had an honest, sensible face, one that Shiban liked. 'But we will not be waiting long – the uncertainty has gone from him now. He is anxious to move, to put all this behind us and join the war.'

Shiban let his head fall back onto the metal of the apothecarion cot. He had never been unhappy to hear of a new campaign; since Phemus, it had been the only thing he had wished for. Now, though, it was all different. They would be fighting old allies, brothers they had once marched out into the stars with as the vanguard of an assertive, united species.

'I thought you'd be happy to hear that,' Ilya said.

Shiban closed his eyes. 'Happy?' he said, dryly. 'Not quite. This is not the war I was bred to fight.'

He could feel consciousness slipping away again, dragged by the powerful sedatives coursing around his system. He flexed his fingers, unused to feeling them out of their gauntlets.

'You will remember joy, Shiban,' said Ilya. 'That is the difference between you and them, the Scars and the others – you laugh when taking up your blades.'

'We did,' murmured Shiban, drifting into drugged sleep, thinking of Torghun, thinking of Hasik, and wondering what fate awaited them all. 'Once, we really did.'

The Khan and Yesugei stood alone on the *Swordstorm,* locked away in the primarch's personal chambers. The field of stars showed in the main viewer, glittering and infinite. Neither of them wore armour. Yesugei was in his Stormseer's ceremonial robes, the Khan in the old garb of a Khitan hunter – furs, long boots, dun-red cloak.

The primarch's wounds had taken a long time to heal, by his standards. Mortarion's scythe, it was postulated, had been envenomed with some kind of toxin, hampering the restorative process. For the

first time in his life, Jaghatai bore scars not of his own making.

'We were richly deceived,' the Khan said slowly, the words dragged from his proud lips unwillingly.

'Not only us,' said Yesugei calmly.

'We were the last to find out.'

'There is no shame in that.' Yesugei looked down at his hands. The skin was blistered from the fires he had unleashed upon Ledak. That had been a shameful lapse, though cathartic. 'Magnus knew more than any of us, and for longer. That did not stop him making poor choices. Perhaps we were preserved.'

The Khan smiled wryly. 'Preserved by ignorance.'

'Those who know the truth are not equal to those who love the truth.'

The Khan raised an eyebrow. 'One of your Qo sages?'

'Terran, as it happens.'

'Ah.'

They stood in silence for a while. Behind them, the fire crackled in the grate.

'So what now, lord?' asked Yesugei.

The Khan's nostrils flared a little. He continued staring out at the starfield. His gaze had always been hard; now it seemed harder.

'The Legion is intact. We are clear to hunt again.'

'And those who declared for Horus?'

'They did not know what they were doing. We all loved Horus.' The Khan turned to Yesugei. '*I* loved Horus. The Horus who was. None of them knew what you had discovered, and if they had then they would have recoiled, just as you did.' The Khan looked pensive. 'I gave them freedom, and they used it. Who should be punished for that?'

'Discipline must be maintained.'

The Khan nodded. 'It will be. Hasik knows his fate. Others, too – the khans, the ones who should have exercised restraint.'

Yesugei thought for a moment. 'And now I am reminded of a legend. An old one, from the Talskar heartland.'

The Khan smiled tolerantly. 'Oh?'

'A khan marches on the territory of his enemy,' said Yesugei. 'He takes his three brothers with him, all of whom are trusted men. On the eve of combat, he finds the brothers have been exchanging messages with the enemy, hopeful of reaching accommodation rather than fighting. The khan is furious, and summons them to his ger. He hears their confessions, but his rage does not abate. The brothers tell him they were deceived and repent of their actions. Each of them, however, knows the law of the Altak, and prepares for death.

'The khan consults his zadyin arga, as is customary. Five counsel death by beheading, but the sixth, the last, demurs. The khan demands to know why they should be spared. The weather-maker replies thus: "Khan, our enemies are cunning. If they succeed with their lies, we are divided. If they fail, they know these men will be executed. In either case, your horde is weakened, and they stand to prevail in battle."

'The khan listens to this counsel and sees the wisdom of it. He asks what he should do. The weather-maker replies thus: "Across the Altak there is no greater prize than honour, no heavier bond than shame. These men are shamed, and will perform any deed to expunge it. Send them ahead of your army. The enemy will see them coming and think them friends, but instead they will fight until death takes them, knowing only this way to recover their honour. When your army follows them, they will find an enemy weakened, just as they hoped to weaken you. Do this, and the victory will be yours."'

The Khan nodded, amused. ‘Did he win?’

Yesugei looked back out, noncommittally, at the viewscreen. ‘I find legends are generally written by the victors.’

The Khan clasped his hands behind his back. ‘Warbands,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘Infiltrators. You took this tactic from the Iron Hand.’

‘Henricos has become a master of such warfare. Our brothers could learn much, fighting with him.’

‘Then I will think on it. Perhaps some will serve in this way.’

‘It would be a penance. It would cleanse their souls.’

‘Theirs are not the only souls that need cleansing.’

Yesugei paused before speaking again, looking preoccupied. The Khan waited for him.

‘I had... dreams,’ Yesugei said, haltingly.

‘Dreams of what?’

‘I saw you fighting. A spectre of the underworld, on a world of ruins.’

‘You saw Mortarion.’

Yesugei looked uneasy. ‘I do not know. In my dreams, you were slain.’

The Khan smiled. ‘Then, it seems, you did not have a true vision.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Yesugei. ‘Or maybe it was of something else. Something yet to come.’

‘Do you still have these dreams?’

‘Not since we arrived at Prospero.’

‘Then your answer is there.’

‘I have not slept since we arrived at Prospero.’

The Khan sighed. ‘My friend, not everything is fated,’ he said, though as the words left his lips he remembered what Magnus had told him.

All is known.

‘Not everything,’ admitted Yesugei, ‘but you were always bound up with the warp. All your brothers were. There is a pattern emerging. You have made an enemy of Mortarion, and he will not forget it.’

The Khan grinned rakishly. ‘Others, too. Russ must still be foaming at the mouth. Dorn as well. We are out on our own, distrusted by all, just as always. I find I cannot be truly upset about this.’

Yesugei looked at him. ‘So what is next?’

‘For now? The Legion is wounded. Tribunals will be held at the kurultai. Pride will be punished, loyalty rewarded. When we next hunt, we will be united again. That is the first step.’

‘And after that?’

The Khan remained staring at the stars. His scarred face felt tighter than it had done. Primarchs did not age, not like mortals, but neither were they wholly free of the wearing powers of time.

‘Horus must be stopped,’ he said quietly. ‘If it ends us all, he must be stopped. We will take the fight to the void, playing to our strengths.’

‘That will not be enough.’

‘It will slow him.’

‘Then where will it end?’

The Khan did not reply.

‘Henricos asked me a question before we set course for Prospero,’ said Yesugei. ‘He asked me whether I trusted that you would make the same decision we did.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘That I had faith you would.’

‘Did you mean that?’

‘I had no idea what you would do. There were some nights I feared you might have remembered the old loyalties. Let us be honest, you have never seen eye to eye with your father, nor those around him.’

The Khan nodded. ‘I won’t pretend otherwise. If you had asked me on Chondax what I wanted to believe, it was that Horus had been wronged. I almost gave the order for Alaxxes. Had the Alpha Legion not intervened, I might have done it.’

‘But it was not them that held you back.’

‘No, not them.’ The Khan remembered how it had been then, with contradictory missives spilling from the lips of the star-speakers every hour. He remembered the anguish of his indecision, hidden from all but Qin Xa.

‘What, then?’

The Khan looked at him. ‘Because it was what I wished for. Because I wanted it to be true. It was the easier course, the one my hearts leapt at.’ He smiled grimly. ‘And if we learned anything from our home world, it is to distrust the path of ease. Comfort leads to decadence. Every worthy thing is difficult.’

Yesugei pondered that. ‘You sound like a zadyin arga.’

The Khan laughed. It was a clear sound – harder, perhaps, than before, but free of doubt.

‘I am no such thing,’ he said, turning back to the stars. The void gazed back at him, as if beckoning him into its war-torn embrace. ‘I am the Warhawk, the berkut, the wide-ranger. I am the spirit of wildfire, the uncatchable, the master of the ice-blue heavens. I have travelled further than any of my brothers, and none of them know my mind.’

He felt a stirring of savagery as he spoke, the kindling of an old joy, one that Chondax had ravaged but not quite extinguished.

‘What they say of hawks is also true,’ he said, his eyes glinting. ‘You have said it yourself, many times – we never forget the shape of the hunt. In the end we always come back to the hand that loosed us.’

It was just as Magnus had told him.

But you still have a choice, brother.

‘So when the hour comes,’ he said, ‘whatever the fates demand, the White Scars *will* be on Terra.’

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